ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM
I'll do anything to become a librarian!
Part 3 Adopted Daughter of an Archduke Vol.4
Author: Miya Kazuki
Illustrator: You Shiina

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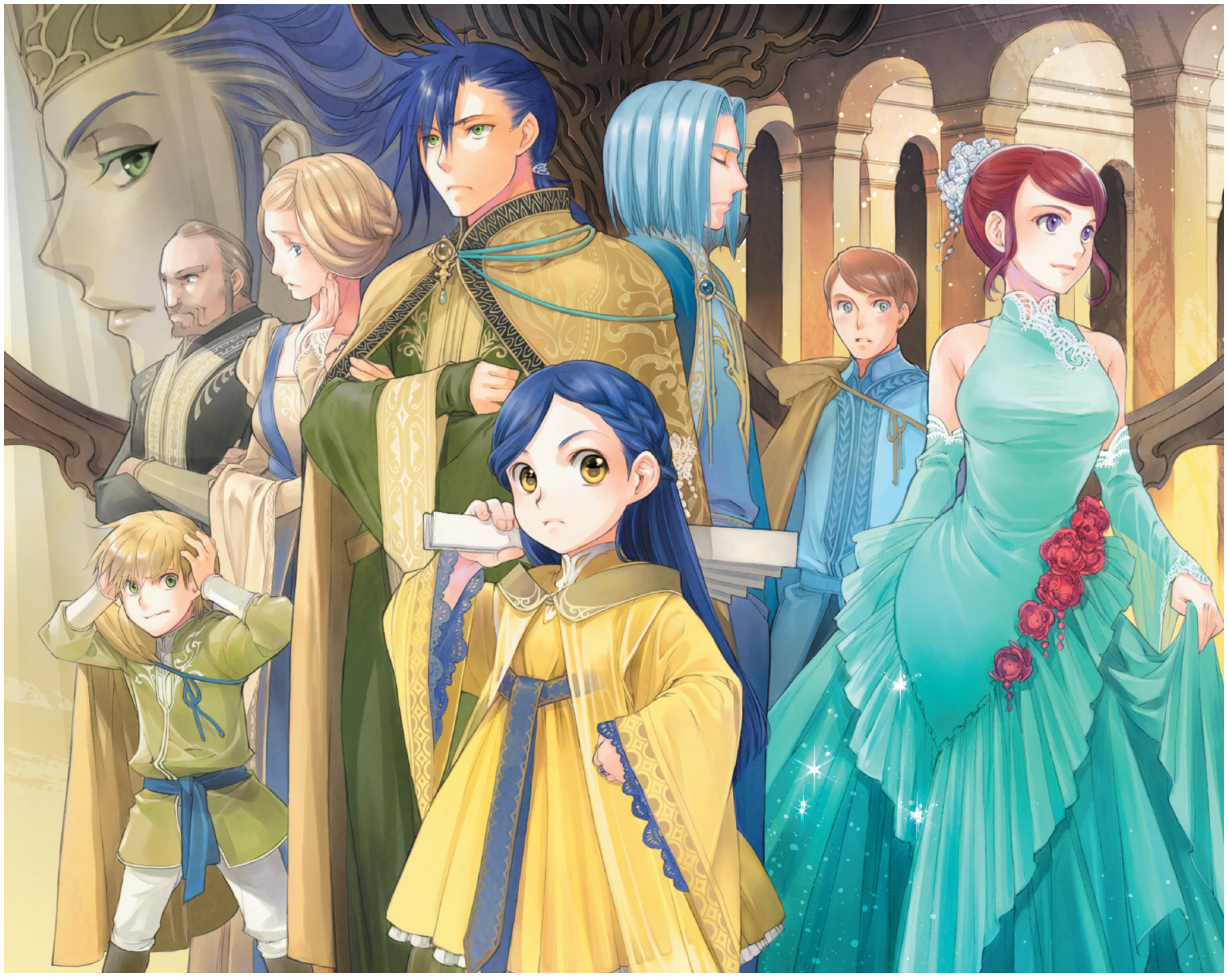

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Kark
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Joisontak
Bessel
Leisegang
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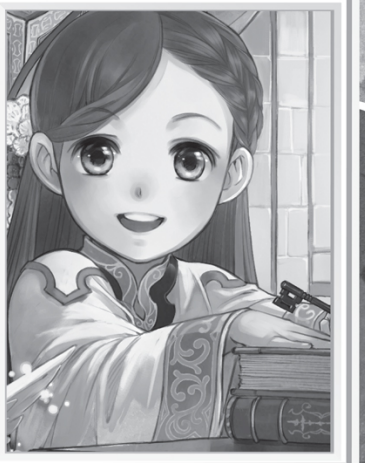
Ehrenfest

Cast of Characters

The Archduke's Family



Rozemyne
The protagonist. She went from the daughter of a soldier to the adopted daughter of the archduke, changing her name in the process. But her personality hasn't changed at all – she'll do whatever it takes to read books.

Ferdinand
Sylvester's brother from another mother. He is Rozemyne's guardian in the temple.

Sylvester
The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.

Florencia
Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.

Wilfried
Sylvester's oldest son, and now Rozemyne's older brother.

Bonifatius
Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Summary of Part Two:

After becoming an apprentice blue shrine maiden, Myne built a workshop in the temple, giving food and work to the starving orphans while busily spending her days developing printing through trial and error with her Gutenbergs. However, she was suddenly attacked by a foreign noble brought in by the High Bishop. In order to gain enough status to protect her family and attendants, Myne resolved to become the archnoble Rozemyne, soon to be adopted by the archduke.

Karstedt
The commander of Ehrenfest's knights. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira
Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

The Knight Commander's Family

Eckhart
Karstedt's oldest son. Serves as Ferdinand's guard knight.

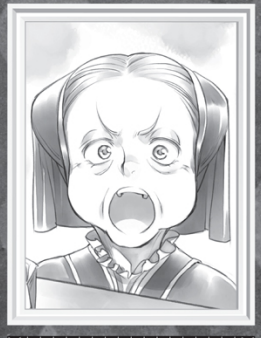
Lamprecht
Karstedt's second son. A knight who serves as Wilfried's guard.

Cornelius
Karstedt's third son. An apprentice knight who serves as Rozemyne's guard.

Ottilie
An attendant and an archnoble. Elvira's friend.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Angelica
Apprentice guard knight. A mednoble in the middle of growing her manablade.



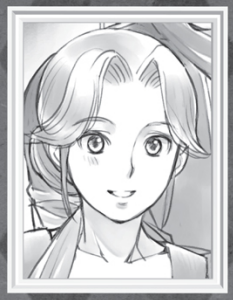
Rihyarda
Rozemyne's head attendant in the castle. An archnoble who took care of Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.

Brigitte
A knight and a mednoble. Giebe Illgner's younger sister.

Damuel
A knight and a laynoble who continues to guard Rozemyne.

Lower City Family

Gunther
Myne's father.



Effa
Myne's mother.

Tuuli
Myne's older sister.

Kamil
Myne's little brother.

Lower City Merchants

Benno	Head of the Plantin Company.
Mark	Benno's right-hand man.
Lutz	A leherl apprentice.
Otto	Head of the Gilberta Company.
Corinna	A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.
Gustav	Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.
Frieda	Gustav's granddaughter.
Damian	Grandson of Gustav.

Temple Attendants

Fran	In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Zahm	In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil	In charge of the workshop.
Fritz	In charge of the workshop.
Wilma	In charge of the orphanage.
Monika	A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola	A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella	Rozemyne's personal chef.
Hugo	Rozemyne's personal chef.
Rosina	Rozemyne's personal musician.

Gutenbergs

Ingo	Foreman of a carpentry workshop.
Zack	A smith. Comes up with ideas.
Johann	A smith. Turns ideas into reality.

Other Nobles

Oswald	Wilfried's head attendant.
Justus	Rihyarda's son and Ferdinand's retainer.
Giebe Illgner	Brigitte's older brother.
Georgine	Sylvester's older sister and the first wife of Ahrensbach.
Veronica	Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.
Viscountess Dahldolf	Shikza's mother. Her first name is Gloria.

Other

Kampfer	A blue priest being trained by Ferdinand.
Frietack	A blue priest being trained by Ferdinand.
Richt	Hasse's new mayor.
Dirk	An orphan forced to sign a submission contract with Count Bindewald.
Delia	Rozemyne's former attendant from when she was a shrine maiden.

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Prologue

In the midst of a cool mid-spring breeze, Tuuli was out and about, shopping with her mother Effa and her childhood friend Lutz. It was a tradition in Ehrenfest for girls to switch from knee-length to shin-length skirts upon reaching ten years of age, which meant she needed to prepare clothes for her upcoming birth season.

The apprentice contracts that started at the same time as one's baptism also tended to end when one became ten. A child would thus need to decide whether they wanted to renew their contract at the same workshop or move to an entirely new one. It was a significant crossroad, to say the least.

Once her contract ended, Tuuli would be joining Corinna's workshop as an apprentice leherl—the very goal she had been working toward for the past two years. It was currently only a verbal agreement, meaning they had yet to sign any contracts, but there was no way that the Gilberta Company or Corinna's workshop could go back on their word when she was the personal hair stick craftswoman for Lady Rozemyne, the archduke's adopted daughter. Thus, she was preparing for the move without worrying too much about it.

Next summer, I'll be a leherl just like Lutz.

It would mean saying goodbye to all the friends she had worked with over the years, but Tuuli was walking on air, having come one step closer to her dream. She briskly reached the city's central plaza before turning back to look at Effa and Lutz, who were following behind.

"So, Lutz—where to now?" she asked.

"We'll be ordering your workshop clothes, as well as a Gilberta Company apprentice outfit, since you'll occasionally be accompanying them to the temple as Lady Rozemyne's personnel. It'll be easier for us to place these orders first, as that way we don't have to carry the other clothes we're buying today around with us. That's why we'll be starting with Corinna's workshop."

At Benno's request, Lutz was accompanying Tuuli today. She thought it

was really impressive that he was always looking after others and helping them like that.

“Thanks for helping with this, Lutz. I know you didn’t have to come.”

“No worries. Master Benno asked me to, and I’ve gotta get my summer clothes as well.”

Lutz took the lead, starting to explain where they were headed. Once they had passed through the plaza and entered the north part of the city, the atmosphere became noticeably more high-class; the passersby were wearing visibly more expensive clothes, and their tones were much more polite.

As she noticed her mother looking around hesitantly, Tuuli came to realize that, at some point, she herself had simply gotten used to going to the north part of the city. While she still felt nervous going into Corinna’s workshop, walking around outside wasn’t stressful at all anymore. She giggled to herself, looking around as she continued to follow after Lutz.

I wonder if other people mistake me for a northerner now?

“What’s with the grin, Tuuli?”

“Lutz, Mrs. Corinna personally invited me to join her workshop so that I could make Lady Rozemyne’s hair sticks. Isn’t that amazing?”

Any apprentice knew what a proud achievement it was to have another workshop specifically ask you to work for them. Lutz congratulated her with an amused smile, but Effa looked a little exasperated.

“Tuuli, you shouldn’t say things like that in public.”

Other craftspeople would certainly empathize with how significant it was for Tuuli to be scouted, and her coworkers always made a point to celebrate the apprentices moving to new workshops. But she was a poor southerner moving to a rich northern workshop—something that barely ever happened. It was likely that she would attract more envy than sincere praise for her good fortune, and in such a cramped city, it was much easier to live if you avoided attracting unnecessary resentment.

Tuuli puffed out her cheeks in response. “I know, I know. But what’s the problem? Nobody around here even knows us.”

She instinctively knew that this wasn’t something she should openly talk about, even to her friends, which was why she had refrained from bragging no matter how much she wanted to. When people asked what her plans were, all she could do was respond with vague answers.

“Lutz has already joined the Gilberta Company, so I should at least be

able to talk to him about this. It’s not like I mention it around the neighborhood. How could I go on about joining Mrs. Corinna’s workshop when Laura’s upset that she might not even be able to stay at our current one?”

Everyone in Tuuli’s current workshop knew that she was often invited over by Corinna to make hair sticks, so they could surely piece together where she was moving if they thought about it for a second. But even then, she had tried to avoid outwardly saying it to anyone besides her family.

“Yeeeah... Leherl contracts are a big deal to anyone who’s worked hard for them, but you can’t really talk about ’em when others are having a hard time just getting their current contracts renewed. Since I’m already a leherl and won’t be changing stores, I can’t say I understand how rough the envy gets for people who are changing workshops... but I get that you’ve been working hard, Tuuli.”

Lutz spoke without a trace of resentment, and his words helped to ease Tuuli’s heart just a little. She had always kept her silence when people started talking about their contracts, but even then, they often looked at her with jealousy. The fact that Lutz was treating her the same as always was a relief.

“You might not know how hard it is to change workshops, but you still really struggled at first, right?” Tuuli asked.

Right after his baptism, Lutz had joined a big store in the north part of town as an apprentice merchant, without his parents’ introduction or any experience in the business to rely on. Tuuli was getting confused from all the differences just moving to another workshop in the same industry, and yet Lutz had been thrust into a new world at a much younger age without anyone to guide him.

“You know, Lutz... If you hadn’t gotten into the Gilberta Company, then I wouldn’t have thought it was even possible for me to join Corinna’s workshop. You really are incredible.”

“Hey, that’s all thanks to Myne. I only got in because she negotiated with Master Benno, and having access to her workshop in the temple gave me a chance to prove my worth to the store,” Lutz said casually as he looked at Tuuli. “My place as a leherl is only secure right now because I’m their connection to the archduke’s adopted daughter. I mean, sure, I worked hard as well, but... Yeah.

“Aren’t you in the same boat, though? You were able to become a hair stick craftsman because Myne taught you how to make them yourself. And now that she’s asking for your hair sticks as the archduke’s adopted daughter, the Gilberta Company’s desperate to get their hands on you. You’re working hard to make the best hair sticks you can, for sure, but Myne’s the one who paved the road ahead for you.”

Normally, nobody would entrust the crafting of a hair ornament meant for the archduke’s daughter to an apprentice who wasn’t even ten years old yet. Everyone wanted to personally work for the archduke’s family, so adults would snatch that kind of work away from kids by saying they weren’t ready for it or something along those lines. The only reason the Gilberta Company hadn’t done that was because they understood that Myne wanted to see her family, and Lutz was making it clear that Tuuli was only in the position she was thanks to her little sister preferring her hair sticks.

“Right... That’s true,” she replied.

Tuuli could remember back when Myne had collapsed all the time, barely been able to help out, and frequently ended up bedridden with fevers, and these memories were so deeply ingrained in her mind that she initially found Lutz’s words hard to accept. But her current situation really had only been possible thanks to Myne.

“That’s why I’m not gonna let anyone beat me when it comes to printing and paper-making. You’ve gotta do the same and hone your skills so that nobody can make better hair sticks than you. There are eventually gonna be adults coming outta the woodwork who are better than you, and if their hair sticks are way more impressive than yours, you’ll end up losing her business.”

Were the Gilberta Company to sell the archduke’s adopted daughter inferior hair sticks while other noblewomen had access to better ones, it would be seen as a disgraceful form of mockery.

“Tuuli, do you know what’ll happen if your hair sticks end up looking worse?”

“I won’t be able to see Myne anymore, right?”

“Nah. Corinna and Master Benno would never risk angering Myne by doing something like that. You’d still go to deliver the hair sticks, of course, but they wouldn’t be yours. You’d have to give her ones made by someone else, all while pretending that you made them yourself. You wouldn’t want

that, would you?”

Tuuli shook her head; that was the last thing she wanted. She once again steeled her resolve to keep working hard, determined to keep working for Lady Rozemyne.

“Why, if it isn’t Lutz and Tuuli. Benno told me that you’d be arriving soon,” a familiar craftswoman said as they entered Corinna’s workshop. “Lutz, you can handle the paperwork while Tuuli and I go to the changing room to get her measurements done. You have other urgent errands that you need to finish today, don’t you?”

The craftswoman swiftly guided Tuuli and Effa to the changing room in the back. There were several seamstresses there, who instructed Tuuli to remove her clothes so that she could be measured.

“It feels so strange making work clothes for you after all this time. I mean, you’ve been coming here for two whole years now,” one seamstress said to Tuuli once she was in her underclothes.

Effa smiled, sensing that Tuuli was already welcome in the workshop. “We’ll be coming to sign her contract at the end of spring. Everyone, please take good care of my daughter.”

“Oh, we will. She’s been coming here to teach us how to make hair sticks for years, but now we’ll finally be working together. I’m sure it’ll be wonderful.”

Tuuli could feel her nerves starting to fade as everyone welcomed her with open arms, and the lingering fear that her joy was sure to be met with tragedy slowly began to ease.

“You’ll need a Gilberta Company apprentice outfit for when you deliver goods to the temple, right? We’ll go ahead and measure you for that as well, then.”

As measure after measure was placed against her body, Tuuli couldn’t help but feel a little strange. She had helped to measure Myne and Brigitte in the past, but this was her first time getting made-to-order clothes from a workshop. As a seamstress herself, she was excited to finally be on the other side for a change.

“Given how fast Tuuli has been growing, we should make the clothes a little too big for her,” Effa said to a seamstress. “Otherwise, she’ll soon grow out of them and we’ll need to order new ones.”

“Shall we make the skirt a little on the longer side, then?” a seamstress

replied.

Tuuli put her clothes back on while her mother was busy talking to the seamstresses, and once the order was done, they exited the changing room.

“All done getting measured, Tuuli? C’mere, then. The shoemaker’s here,” Lutz said.

No time was wasted before Tuuli was seated in a chair and measured again, this time for leather shoes. She desperately struggled to hold back her laughter as her ticklish feet were touched all over.

Myne said that getting measured was rough. Now I understand why!

Once Tuuli had finished ordering the clothes she needed, Lutz, Tuuli, and Effa went to the high-end used clothes store that they had visited several times since Myne first bought clothes for her there. Today, they were looking for things to be worn in the north of the city, namely a bodice and a shin-length skirt suitable for a ten-year-old girl.

“I’ve gotta buy some clothes of my own, so let’s split up and each get what we need,” Lutz said, before promptly heading to the boys’ section. Tuuli moved to the girls’ section with Effa, who looked visibly worried about buying clothes from such an expensive place.

“So, Mom—is this long enough?” Tuuli asked, showing her the skirt she had just put on.

Effa bent down to get a closer look, then stood back up with an amused smile. “That should work. It looks a little long on you right now, but come autumn, you’ll be glad to have that extra length.” Watching Tuuli try on one skirt after another seemed to have made her a lot less tense. “Now we need to get you a bodice. Hm... How does this one look?”

Tuuli took the bodice from her mother. It was like a vest, except the front was fastened together with lace, and girls started wearing them at ten years old to give them a prettier figure. She began to put it on, tightening the garment until it was pressed firmly against her body.

“I think I’ll need a bit more practice before I can do it perfectly,” Tuuli mused as she twisted from side to side in a mirror, feeling a little more like an adult than before. In her own opinion, she actually looked pretty good.

As Tuuli smiled to herself, Effa tapped a finger against the lace of the bodice. “There’s a knack to tying these so they don’t come undone. What you’ve done here will come loose before the end of your workday. You’ll need to practice before summer comes, but in any case—is this the one you

want?”

“Mm... I think this other one’s cuter. What do you think?” Tuuli asked, holding up another bodice that had caught her eye earlier.

Effa’s face clouded over slightly. “It’s definitely cute, but don’t you think it’s a bit much to wear to work?”

The two agonized over the choice for a while, before eventually spotting Lutz dumping the clothes he had picked onto the counter. Tuuli called out and started to wave him over.

“Lutz, Lutz. Which of these would be better for a Gilberta Company apprentice?”

“Since you’re gonna be a leherl, you should probably get both.”

“Both...? But I don’t need that many. I can make do with one,” Tuuli replied, but Lutz shook his head.

“As a leherl, you won’t just be going to the north part of the city whenever Corinna calls you; you’ll be living there. You’re gonna want a few changes of clothes, especially with summer coming up.”

It was true that Tuuli would need several pairs of clothes suitable for her new living arrangement, but the thought of just how expensive that would be made the blood drain from her face. She gloomily cradled her head, while Effa stood in place looking visibly shaken. Who could blame them? These clothes were far more expensive than the ones they usually bought.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about the cost. We’ve got a pretty big budget here thanks to everyone’s favorite moneybags,” Lutz said, pulling out a guild card from somewhere beneath his shirt. It turned out that Myne had given him her entire savings from before she became Rozemyne, telling him to use it to keep her connected with her family and to help Tuuli achieve her dreams.

“Hold on, Lutz—just how much did Myne end up making?”

“Seems like she’s stealthily been adding money from her more recent earnings to it, so I can’t give you an exact amount. Either way, she’s making a ton more now that her work’s expanding in scale,” Lutz replied, averting his gaze as he placed the two bodices onto the counter. “Anyway, don’t sweat it. Just buy what you need so you don’t end up embarrassed when it’s time to work. I’m thinking you’ll need one more skirt and another bodice. Probably two or three blouses, too.”

At that, Tuuli and Effa hurriedly went to fetch what Lutz had said they’d

need. The small mountain of clothes on the counter was only getting taller, but Lutz seemed completely unfazed, casually asking the cashier to have it all brought to the Gilberta Company.

“Let’s keep going. There’s a lot more that we need to buy,” Lutz said, before once again walking ahead.

Tuuli was surprised enough that he was leaving the store empty-handed despite how much they had bought, but she was even more surprised that there was apparently more to buy. “Wha...? A lot more?” she asked, her eyes widened. “But we got all the clothes we needed...”

“I just remembered that you’re gonna need new work tools and stationery. You’re gonna get a room now that you’re a leherl, right? That means you’ll need plates and stuff, too. We could put this off until you’ve moved there, since that’s when you’ll actually need it, but you can only use this card when I’m with you, so we might as well get it done now.”

Lutz took them to all sorts of stores, all the while thinking back to what he had needed to buy when he moved into his room at the Gilberta Company. They ended up with pens, ink, boards, plates to be used with other leherls, and so on. These were all things that Tuuli never would have thought to buy on her own.

“We owe you so much, Lutz. All this preparation really was beyond me,” Effa said, shaking her head with a tired expression. She was glad that her daughter’s dream to work at Corinna’s workshop in the north part of the city had come true, but it was completely unlike working in a poorer workshop, both in terms of the clothes they wore and the tools they used.

As a result, she hadn’t known what Tuuli would need, how much she should be paying for her supplies, or what the other apprentices would be using. She was nothing but grateful for Benno’s consideration, both in sending Lutz over to help and looking after the money that Myne had left them.

“I never thought Tuuli would be leaving home so soon...” Effa mused, the reality of the situation only just setting in now that they had bought so many household goods for the move. Once summer came, her daughter would be living an entirely different life. First Myne, and now Tuuli—her children kept leaving the nest, and a little sooner than she would have liked.

“I’m a little scared about leaving home, but I’ll be fine as long as Lutz is there,” Tuuli said, patting her mother on the arm to console her. “Isn’t that

right, Lutz?”

But much to her surprise, Lutz crossed his arms and frowned a little. “I dunno... We might not be able to stick together for too long.”

“Huh? But why? Are you gonna quit...?” Tuuli asked, both her and Effa looking at him with wide eyes. What was he even saying? Leherls couldn’t just leave their jobs.

Lutz glanced around, then lowered his voice. “Can you two keep a secret? Tuuli, I’m only gonna say this ’cause I know you’re joining the Gilberta Company as an apprentice soon.”

After swearing them both to secrecy multiple times, Lutz paused, continuing only once they had gotten back to the poor part of the city where those related to the Gilberta Company rarely ever went.

“Master Benno’s planning to step away from the Gilberta Company to make a new store that deals in paper and books.”

As it turned out, the Gilberta Company was making too much money from printing and paper-making when it was supposed to be a clothing and accessories store. And since these thriving new industries had been actively started by the archduke’s adopted daughter, it was clear that they would only keep growing over time.

“Lady Rozemyne’s caused the industry to grow way too much since she was adopted. Plus, she’s already proposed some original clothing designs that’ll probably end up starting new fashion trends, hasn’t she?”

Corinna was still desperately finalizing the clothing design that Rozemyne had given her for Brigitte’s outfit, and in the case that it became popular with nobles, the Gilberta Company’s status would be boosted even higher. Tuuli understood that.

“The other stores are pretty desperate to get in on these new industries, and Master Benno sure got a stern talking to during the last meeting of all the large store owners. He’s gonna have to start a new store for printing and paper-making so that he can split the profits and protect the Gilberta Company’s share in the clothing market.”

“Mm? It isn’t good that he’s making lots of money?” Tuuli asked, visibly confused. She didn’t really understand why Benno had to protect his store when it was doing so well.

“Making money’s great and all, but when it causes other stores to start getting envious of you, that leads to problems. It’s the same reason why,

even though your move to a new workshop is good, you've had to keep reasonably quiet about it," Lutz explained, which made everything click into place. It certainly was important to avoid making other people jealous.

"Plus," he continued, "Master Benno's planning to take his new store and stick with Lady Rozemyne no matter what happens or where she ends up going. She's funding the entire printing industry right now, and she's his biggest customer, so nothing will start or move forward without her. Her passion for printing is more important to him than sticking in his home duchy."

Nobles often moved to other duchies for the purpose of marriage, and the same fate could very easily befall Rozemyne; since Ehrenfest was fairly weak compared to other duchies, it was entirely plausible that she might one day need to leave for political reasons. In such a case, Benno was prepared to join her personnel and relocate his new printing store to wherever she ended up.

"But he wouldn't be able to do that with the Gilberta Company," Lutz explained. "They've got existing customers, connections, and a trusted reputation; they can't just throw these things away for Lady Rozemyne's sake. Corinna in particular really cares about staying in her hometown, which means that if Lady Rozemyne does end up moving somewhere else, the Gilberta Company won't be following her."

"But I want to go with her!" Tuuli exclaimed. She knew that the Gilberta Company couldn't give up everything it had worked so hard to establish here in Ehrenfest, but she was signing with them specifically so that she could keep being Lady Rozemyne's personnel; not following her if she left would defeat that purpose entirely. "I guess I should sign as a lehange instead, since leherls are tied to their store...?"

"Nah, nah, nah. That's not what I'm saying here. We don't know for sure if she'll end up moving to another duchy. This is all just a maybe. Plus, you'll really want to sign as a leherl if you can—it'll totally change how you're treated, and that's important for poor people like us who don't have any real backers to support us. Everyone will look at you differently."

Lutz had gone from being a lehange to a leherl apprentice, so there was no denying that what he was saying was the truth.

Tuuli grit her teeth. "I mean, I want to sign as a leherl too, for sure, but my dream isn't to join the Gilberta Company. It's... It's to become a top-

class seamstress, and to make her clothes for her someday. I promised her I would."

What mattered to Tuuli more than anything was the promise she had made to Myne right before the archduke adopted her. A gentle hand patted her on the back, and she turned to see Effa looking down at her with a slight smile.

"Tuuli, there's no point worrying about these things on your own. You need to talk to Mrs. Corinna about this. We haven't signed a contract yet, so let's think hard about what will be best for you," she said warmly.

At that, Tuuli nodded, letting out a quiet sigh as they walked back home together. Never in her life had she thought she would need to debate on whether or not to sign a leherl contract.

A New Dress

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we go to the orphanage director’s chambers?” Fran asked. “Monika has gone ahead and prepared to welcome the Gilberta Company.”

They had acquired some cheap cloth that would be pinned onto Brigitte and then cut into a mock-up dress in a process known as draping. It might have been my imagination, but she seemed a little excited as we made our way to the chambers. I was excited too, since Tuuli would be coming with Corinna.

I get to see Tuuli and Lutz again. Eheheh... Heheheheh.

“Good morning, everyone. Thank you for waiting.”

By the time we got there, the Gilberta Company had already arrived; Benno, Lutz, Corinna, Tuuli, and several other seamstresses were in the front hall. We had talked about who would be coming ahead of time, but I was still surprised by how packed the room was. In all honesty, it felt a bit cramped.

Once we had finished exchanging the standard greetings, I glanced over at Monika. “Let’s move so that we can begin adjusting as soon as possible. Fran, I shall leave you to look after the men.”

I went to the hidden room, with Brigitte, Corinna, and Tuuli, as well as the seamstresses carrying their bundles and tools, following close behind.

“Please, come inside. You may join us as well, Monika.”

“As you wish.”

Since this was a fitting for a noblewoman, only women were allowed into the hidden room. As Brigitte stripped down and prepared to be measured, the seamstresses busily moved about, spreading a large piece of cloth across a screen by the entrance so that nobody would be able to see inside when the door opened.

Brigitte had returned her light armor to the shape of a feystone and, with the help of the seamstresses, undressed down to her underclothes. She then transformed one of the feystones she had brought with her into something

of a tight bodysuit. It would allow the dress to be cut without them needing to worry about the needles poking into her skin.

“This serves as the basis for knight armor made from feystones. All students learn to make them upon entering the Royal Academy,” Brigitte explained, gesturing to her new attire. “Even knights who seem to be entirely unarmored are in truth wearing one of these beneath their flashy clothes.”

It seemed that nobles always wore what was basically a Kevlar vest beneath their clothes. In less peaceful duchies, it was standard for even scholars and attendants to wear them to protect against surprise attacks. The fact that I wasn’t required to wear one despite being a member of the archducal family showed just how peaceful Ehrenfest really was.

...I guess you don’t really need bras and stuff when you’ve got a tight bodysuit like that, huh?

I hadn’t really spent much time alone with any older women since becoming a noble, so I wasn’t sure what the underwear situation was for adult women. But if everyone was wearing tight feystone bodysuits, then I could guess that they didn’t need much support in the way of underwear. Commoners probably had more advanced clothing in that department, especially seeing as they already wore things like tight bodices.

Mm... I don’t know. This feels a bit... off. It wouldn’t be very sexy to have a metallic feystone hardened over your upper body with a pair of drawers underneath.

These thoughts were entirely founded in my time spent as Urano, but long-legged beauties looked best in garter belts, not floofy drawers. The thought had never occurred to me since I was too young for sexy lingerie, and even in my Urano days, I had never thought about wearing any, but now I was confident that this world needed an underwear revolution too.

Seriously. The thought of such hot, full-bodied babes wearing lame old drawers is just plain depressing.

But for now, my battle would be making sure female knights had skirts that didn’t flip up when they moved, as this was precisely why they found it necessary to wear such long, bland drawers in the first place. There was no point in me inventing sexy underwear if wearing it made them unable to fight.

Practicality or sexiness? This truly is a question for the ages.

Anyway, while I was deeply pondering other people's underwear in my own little world, Corinna and her seamstresses started pressing the cloth against Brigitte. They folded it according to the designs drawn on the boards, then began snipping away and pinning frills where required. Meanwhile, Tuuli handed them pins, fetched what they needed, and carefully watched everything they did. I silently cheered her on, happy to see that she was trying to absorb as much knowledge as possible.

I was pretty curious to see Brigitte's dress starting to be made before my eyes, but I couldn't just stare at the seamstresses the entire time; the process would take a while, and I could simply check up on them later when they were almost done.

"Monika, would you inform me when the cutting is over? I must discuss other matters with Benno."

"As you wish."

Monika opened the door for me, and I exited the hidden room. It was only Benno, Lutz, Fran, Gil, and Damuel waiting for me on the second floor, which meant I could act a bit more like myself without needing to worry.

"I shall join your discussion until the cutting is done," I said, sitting down and gesturing for Benno to continue as I sipped the tea that Fran had prepared for me.

"First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude," Benno began. "Thanks to your assistance, Lady Rozemyne, I am doing more business with nobles than ever before."

Well, that was what he said out loud, but the look in his dark-red eyes seemed to actually say, *"I'm freakin' busy as hell now and it's all your fault."* As a merchant, he was probably happy to have more sales and connections with nobles, but it was also probably true that he was a step closer to death from overwork.

"Listen, Benno... Any euphemisms are going to go completely over my head. If there's something on your mind, please don't feel you have to mince your words," I said, dropping the noble act while looking over everyone in the room.

Benno eyed Fran and Damuel, slowly dropping his act too. "Yeah?"

"I've been getting the impression that I'm loading way too much work onto the Gilberta Company lately. If you think it's too much for you, I can

distribute some elsewhere.”

“Hey, watch it. I don’t need that kinda pity. Plus, you’ll just make everyone think you’re dropping us, idiot. Are you seriously gonna make the same mistake you just made with Ingo all over again? You wanna jeopardize the future of the Gilberta Company too?”

“Absolutely not!”

“I’m not gonna let anyone else have this work, no matter how busy we get. Get that into your skull and don’t forget it.”

As it turned out, lessening Benno’s workload wouldn’t help at all; the last thing the Gilberta Company wanted was a rumor spreading that they were being cut off.

“I understand that everyone here shares history, but please do try a little harder to keep up appearances,” Fran said with a frown.

Benno and I exchanged looks, then shrugged.

“Lady Rozemyne, I ask that you continue to grace the Gilberta Company with your patronage.”

“But of course.”

“Now, about today’s business... Lady Rozemyne, while we were in Hasse, you said that you wished to network with Giebe Illgner. May I ask for more details?” Benno asked, his eyes narrowed slightly.

A sudden wave of unease washed over me. It was a look that clearly said, *“Are you seriously trying to load more work onto me?”* But there was no helping it now that he had warned me not to give these jobs to any other store; I had no choice but to load more onto him.

“It turns out that Illgner is a mountainous region with an abundance of wood, and there are many species of tree there that I am unfamiliar with. I would like to visit the province to experiment with making new kinds of paper.”

“In other words, you intend to make paper in Illgner...?”

“Yes. I wish to bring Lutz, Gil, and several gray priests for the purpose of making paper. Will that be at all problematic?”

Benno deeply furrowed his brow. “Very. We can’t send Lutz on a trip this important without someone else from the Gilberta Company going with him, but no viable options come to mind. I personally can’t go on such a long-distance journey given our increasing business with nobles, and neither can Mark, since he’s the only other person who can handle that kind

of work by himself.”

His other employees weren’t yet capable of properly conducting themselves in front of a land-owning noble. And while I wasn’t too familiar with the Gilberta Company’s state of affairs, I could assume they were low on manpower, given that they had needed to borrow the help of priests when selling things in the castle.

“Is Otto not capable of doing business with nobles?”

A letter from Dad had mentioned that, once Otto had completed this year’s budget work, he would be quitting his job as a soldier to return to being a merchant. Given that Spring Prayer was over and we were now halfway through the season, chances were that had already happened.

“Otto is perfectly suitable when it comes to his business knowledge, but he has not yet been trained in the mannerisms necessary for working with nobles.”

“He should be fine interacting with laynobles, though, right? Even when he was working at the gate, he was entrusted with letting nobles through. The most important thing is just getting used to the new environment. He could start with laynobles and work his way up.”

Even Dad was able to speak properly to the nobles passing through the gate. Nobles would certainly expect more from a merchant than a guard, but I was certain Otto could do the job once he’d gotten used to it.

“Why not start by pairing up Mark and Otto? You can provide support when necessary and even bring other trainees around,” I suggested.

By this point, even I had managed to learn enough noble mannerisms to get by. If Otto got serious about it, he’d probably be able to act like an archnoble within a single season of practice. Well, assuming he also had a proper teacher, that is.

Benno looked between Fran and me, his brow lowered in thought. “Could you train Otto and his assistant Theo to understand polite mannerisms, just as you trained Leon to be a waiter?”

“Fran? Your thoughts?” I asked. He had been involved with training Leon, and since the only people in the temple who could teach the mannerisms necessary for dealing with nobles were the gray priests who had been trained by Ferdinand, a member of the archducal family, he and Zahm were the only ones out of my attendants suited to the job.

“Well, I should be able to make some time for it, since Zahm will soon

officially become your attendant,” Fran mused. “I already intended to teach Nicola and Monika proper etiquette, and it would not be a problem for Otto and this Theo gentleman to join them in the orphanage director’s chambers. Though I will only be able to teach them etiquette, and nothing more.”

Benno gave a light shrug in response. “The etiquette is the part that’s important. Commoners have no real opportunities to learn how to greet, speak to, or handle things around nobles.”

In the past, Benno had mentioned how tough it had been to find someone who could teach him noble manners. Not even piling up a load of money would necessarily help in finding one. Thus, as payment for providing such a priceless instructor, I asked for the help of two priceless helpers myself.

“Now, as payment for this, I ask that you send Mark and Lutz to Illgner with me once Otto and Theo have learned their noble mannerisms.”

“...As you wish.”

And so, Fran accepted the duty of training Otto and Theo. We would let them know through Lutz when we were ready to start.

“One last thing,” Benno said. “Lutz, Gil—give your reports to Lady Rozemyne.”

“Yes, sir,” they both replied sharply, turning to look my way. They then exchanged a pleased grin with one another, before reverting back to their serious expressions to deliver the reports.

“The new printing press designed by Zack and created by Ingo and Johann has been completed.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed, almost leaping out of my chair at the news, but Fran quickly placed his hands on my shoulders to stop me. He pushed me back down with a smile and directed me to remain seated.

Sorry... I got so excited that, for a second, I completely dropped the refined lady act.

“We would like you to observe the trial run, Lady Rozemyne. What would you recommend we print first?”

As much as I wanted to rush off and see it right away, everyone was indirectly stopping me. Instead, they simply wanted me to provide the base text for something to be printed.

“Does anything in particular come to mind, Lady Rozemyne?” Lutz asked again, urging me to answer.

I leaned forward. “The new printing press exists not for picture books, but books that are filled to the brim with letters. Thus, I would like to focus on text-heavy books for children who have outgrown their picture books.”

I would use the tales about knights commonly told among nobles to write cool, easy-to-understand stories that showed kids what kind of work they did. And while I was at it, I would have Wilma draw wonderful illustrations with Ferdinand as a model to bring in female customers, practically killing two birds with one stone. All I needed to do was add the classic disclaimer at the start: *“This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.”* It was an iron shield, and I wasn’t afraid of Ferdinand objecting. He could take it up in fantasy court.

“Has Ingo finished the letter type cases, the typesetting stand, the composing stick, and the interline spacers? What about Johann? Has he completed the furniture and setting rule?” I asked, wondering about the smaller tools that were just as important in the printing process.

Lutz nodded proudly. “All finished. We’ve also ordered more than enough ink. As soon as we have the manuscript, we can get started.”

Yippee! Praise be to the gods!

“What fantastic news!” I said cheerfully. “I must teach you to use the press and metal letter types as soon as possible. You may find that the letter type cases are quite hard to move. I shall go to the workshop and teach you all at once!”

“Lady Rozemyne, that is a bit...” Fran began, trying to stop me, but I shook my head at him.

“I want to use this opportunity to go from typesetting to printing all the way through at least once. I understand that I mustn’t do any work myself, but I’ve been working toward the creation of a printing press for so long now; I want to be the first to touch it,” I declared, balling my fists in determination.

Fran eventually caved, shaking his head back at me in defeat. Gil shrugged, knowing there was no stopping us now, while Lutz simply crossed his arms.

“I think Fran and Sir Damuel should allow only a select few into the workshop, granting Lady Rozemyne an opportunity to do as she pleases,” Lutz proposed. “Either way, she’ll need to teach us how to use it sooner or

later.”

“Lutz! I knew it. You understand me better than anyone!” I clasped my hands together, moved by his kindness, only to hear him add that letting me do this would calm me down before I did anything crazy.

Ngh... Maybe he knows me too *well.*

“Once I have the manuscript ready, we can begin testing the printing press at once.”

“Please calm down, Lady Rozemyne. At this rate, you’ll surely collapse.”

“If we start printing right away, I wonder if we can have a volume ready by the summer’s Starbind Ceremony?”

“*Calm down.* You’re seriously about to collapse. And if you collapse now, they’re never gonna let you touch the printing press,” Lutz warned. He had switched from his polite language to his usual rough way of speaking when he realized that I wasn’t listening and needed to be properly threatened.

I gasped, sensing that he was serious. “Anything but that.”

As I took deep breaths to collect myself, the feystone by the hidden room’s door lit up.

“Lady Rozemyne, Monika is signaling for you,” Fran said.

“Very well. I shall check up on them.”

I stepped into the hidden room and past the makeshift screen to where Brigitte was. The cheap cloth wrapped around her figure was filled with tiny pins, but it was certainly in the shape of a sleeveless gown. And perhaps due to it being a singular undyed color, it looked entirely like she was wearing a wedding dress.

“My, how wonderful! It looks incredible on you, Brigitte!”

The dress was on another level entirely from the one she had worn last year. I walked around her, examining it from top to bottom. It mostly matched the design I had provided, but there were a few awkward areas that caught my attention, probably due to this being the first time Corinna had ever made something like this.

“Let’s see... Corinna, pinch the dress up around here to better define the chest. You’ll also want the back part to look a little more like this,” I explained as Corinna took out several pins and adjusted their positions to alter how Brigitte’s figure was presented. The actual dress would be cut out

from fabric with these pieces as a basis, so everyone had a serious look in their eyes.

The cloth clung tightly to Brigitte's upper body, wonderfully accentuating her curves from her chest down to her hips. Frills had been sewn by her waist, leading to a long skirt that used plenty of cloth. Since Brigitte was a knight, the design needed to emphasize being easy to move around in, so it was deliberately light and thin for how much cloth was being used.

"Brigitte, is the dress uncomfortably tight anywhere?" I asked.

"Not at all. I like that the lack of cloth covering my shoulders makes it easy to move my arms. Plus, in emergencies, I could simply cover them with a feystone."

Despite how lovely it looked, she was focusing entirely on how convenient it would be during battle. I wasn't sure whether I should praise her for that, or beg her to treat the situation at least a little more romantically. As much as I wanted her to use this dress to pin down a wonderful husband, she didn't seem to be thinking about that at all.

"...May I invite Damuel inside? I think that the dress suits you like a dream, Brigitte, but I would like to hear the opinion of a nobleman as well."

"Certainly. I would also like to ask about other female knights wearing this," Brigitte replied.

She didn't seem opposed to the idea, so I exited the hidden room again. "Damuel, would you come with me for a moment?"

"May I ask why?"

"We would appreciate the opinion of a man. Please tell us what you think about Brigitte's dress, if you would."

Damuel merely blinked in response, visibly confused.

"I know that Brigitte would wear the dress no matter her own thoughts, since I designed it myself, but there is no point in us making something that does not appeal to noblemen. I would like to hear your frank, up-front opinion as a man so that we may move forward without any such fears. We cannot allow Brigitte to bring shame upon herself simply as the result of my own potentially unusual taste in fashion. Don't you agree?"

At that point, Damuel stiffened, before nodding in agreement. In a sense, he had seen many of my rampages up close and personal; he knew that I was usually out of sync with the rest of society. If my actions were about to

publicly embarrass Brigitte, then I'd much rather he stopped me now.

"Damuel is here. May we come in, Brigitte?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

I entered the hidden room once more, this time with Damuel following behind me. But the moment we circled around the partition screen, he froze, letting out a small gasp.

Hearing the noise, I turned around and looked up at him. "Damuel?"

He didn't respond. His eyes were open wide in shock, his gaze so fixed on Brigitte that he was practically boring holes into her. Then, a quiet exhale escaped his slightly agape mouth. He blinked a few times, as though he had seen something so dazzling that he was unable to believe his eyes, and his mouth slowly formed a smile.

...I think I just witnessed the very moment someone fell in love.

Even Corinna and the seamstresses had caught on that the motionless Damuel was completely lovestruck, and they started looking at him with amused eyes. I could practically hear them say, *"Spring certainly is the season when love blooms."*

My urge to grin alongside them mixed with my desire to push Damuel forward. In my eyes, his feelings were so obvious that he might as well just confess them.

"So, Damuel—what do you think?"

"Wha?! I, er..." Damuel staggered the moment I pulled on his cape, shooting me a surprised look and blurting out a response. He then quickly turned his gaze back to Brigitte. "*Ahem*. It's, ah... It's quite nice, I think."

Don't get all embarrassed now! You need to be more direct or your praise won't get across! Come on! You can do it!

I tried silently cheering him on, but deep down I already knew—Damuel was kind of a wimp. He averted his gaze, unable to look directly at Brigitte, and said nothing more. Everyone else watched on, waiting for him to say *something*, but his mouth remained shut. The only things that moved were his eyes as they wandered anxiously around the room.

"Lady Rozemyne designed this specifically for me, but do you think it would be suitable for other female knights as well?" Brigitte asked, looking down at her dress.

"Maybe. I think, well..." Damuel mustered a vague answer before trailing off, eventually resorting to a small nod. I wanted him to be clearer

with his feedback, but love had melted his brain so thoroughly that it didn’t seem like he would be of much use here.

“It seems the dress has passed the test, so we shall go with this design. Damuel, please vacate the room so that we may complete the fitting,” I said, deciding it was best to give up on him for now and shooing him out.

Once the door was closed, I turned around and anxiously looked at Brigitte. His true feelings had been so obvious, there was no way she hadn’t noticed as well.

“Um, Brigitte...”

She gave a small, embarrassed smile. “Damuel certainly is easy to understand, isn’t he? That was the first time a man has ever looked at me like that, so I must confess to feeling a little flustered right now.”

Nah, nah, nah. You’re genuinely stunning, Brigitte. And men have definitely *looked at you like that before. You just never noticed because they weren’t so obvious about it.*

She probably hadn’t noticed because she was too busy thinking about her family, her province, and things to do with combat. Or perhaps she only had eyes for the person she was engaged to. It was bound to be one or the other, if you asked me.

“Brigitte, about Damuel...”

“I think he is a fine man with an overall diligent personality. He isn’t overly uptight, no doubt due to him being a second son and lacking a title himself, and I do not believe he would even consider attempting to control Illgner. Furthermore, Lady Rozemyne, the simple fact that he is one of your favored guard knights makes him a valuable asset to Illgner,” she replied.

As I blinked in surprise at how positively Brigitte thought of Damuel, she gave me a bright smile.

“But the gap between our mana capacities is simply too vast; I am not even considering being with him.”

She had flat-out rejected him, and with a pretty smile at that. But her words reminded me—Ferdinand had mentioned once before that, in order to have children together, two people need to possess similar quantities of mana. For that reason, I wouldn’t have been able to marry anyone as a commoner. It seemed that, in noble society, romance was predicated on mana capacity, so a gap too vast would end a romance before it had even begun.

...Damuel fell in love with Brigitte, and she rejected him almost immediately. This is just too sad.

I knew that my blessing was gradually expanding Damuel's mana capacity, but I wasn't sure how much it had grown, nor how much it would need to grow for Brigitte to change her mind. Was it possible that he could earn Brigitte's consideration by working hard? I thought it over, but I had zero experience with romance and a weak grasp on noble culture at best. The chances were that nothing good would come from me butting my head into the love lives of others, so I would just have to silently cheer him on in my heart.

Damuel, if you can somehow close the mana gap between you and Brigitte, you might just have a chance... Do the best you can!

The New Printing Press’s Trial Run

“Now then, what story should we start with?” I wondered aloud.

Everyone from the Gilberta Company had since left, and I was now at my desk in the High Bishop’s chambers. I needed to blast out a manuscript as soon as possible so that we could try making a text-filled book using the new printing press. There were several tales about knights among the collection of stories I had written down over the winter, and by using those as a base, it wouldn’t be too hard to put something together.

“Maybe I should start by printing something short, with our goal ultimately being to create a collection of knight stories...”

Gil responded with an affirmative nod. “Given that this is a trial run, I think starting with a small manuscript would be best.”

After talking it over with him a bit more, I settled on writing a story with a happy ending. In it, a knight would hunt a feybeast, before gifting its feystone to his beloved.

A few days later, I completed the reasonably thin knight short story. Come seventh bell, it was time for me to listen to my attendants’ reports on the day, so I took this opportunity to tell Gil and Fritz that I was done.

“Gil, Fritz—the manuscript for the short story is now finished. We shall do the typesetting in the afternoon on a sunny day to limit the children’s access to the workshop. Please pass this information on to Lutz. Furthermore, please decide with Fran who is going to be present in the workshop to observe the trial run.”

“As you wish,” Gil replied promptly.

Fritz momentarily fell into thought, then softly crinkled his calm, dark-brown eyes. “Gil, I imagine that you wish to participate in the typesetting as well, so I shall take the children to the forest. Please listen closely in my place, as you will need to learn the process well enough for the both of us.”

“You can count on me. Lady Rozemyne, are the illustrations completed, too?”

“As this printing session will consist entirely of text, there is no need for us to wait on illustrations; we’ll be using mimeograph printing for them, as we already have been. Oh, but I do intend to ask Wilma if she can begin the new illustrations. You may send her a messenger so that she knows about this ahead of time.”

The next afternoon, I excitedly headed to the orphanage with the completed manuscript in hand, planning to ask Wilma to draw the accompanying illustrations.

“Wilma, I would like you to draw illustrations for this knight story, using Ferdinand’s face as a reference.”

“...Lady Rozemyne, I believe doing that will only lead to you earning the High Priest’s ire once again,” Wilma said with a worried look. But I had an ancient, unbreakable blade at my disposal, passed down through my family for generations.

“There is no need to worry—we’re only using him as a reference, after all. The knight in the story is someone entirely different from the High Priest. For one, they do not have the same name. It will also be clearly stated in the book that its contents are mere fiction, with any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, being purely coincidental.”

“Oh my. You always have a trick up your sleeve, don’t you?” Wilma asked, her eyes widening in complete awe. She then looked up to the ceiling in thought. “In that case, I will modify the hairstyle and the like so that he appears different enough.”

“Thank you ever so much, Wilma.”

“Think nothing of it. I have such a delightful time drawing the High Priest that, when he banned our illustrations, I was more depressed than anyone,” my partner in crime said with a giggle. I had successfully secured the pictures I needed.

“We’ll print them as usual once we’ve finished printing all the text. Plus, we’re going to be using an entire page for the illustration, so there’s no need to think about size or where to put the letters. You don’t need to hurry, either, since the pictures won’t be added right away.”

“Understood.”

I stood up, having finished my conversation with Wilma, which encouraged the kids playing in the corner of the dining hall to come rushing

over.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you making a new picture book? What’s it about?”

The picture book about the autumn gods had been completed while I was attending Spring Prayer, and the workshop was presently in the middle of making one on the winter gods. They were curious, therefore, what my next one would be about. It seemed that my plan to raise the orphans into bookworms was going off without a hitch.

“Ahahaha. Once I’ve finished the book about the winter gods, I will be making a collection of knight stories. But I’m not sure you all will be able to read it, since it’s going to be filled with text.”

“We’ll make sure we can! Learning new words is so much fun!”

“The collection shall be based on stories that I’ve gathered from noble children. I am very much looking forward to all of you one day writing new stories for me, too.”

“We’ll practice so we can get good at writing!” the orphans said, their eyes brimming with motivation.

The sight warmed my heart; I wanted them to keep up this enthusiasm in hopes that it would drive them to make books of all kinds themselves when they grew up. Teaching the orphans their letters and the art of enjoying reading was all an investment so that I myself could have more books in the future.

The day had finally arrived. I completed my morning work, eager to typeset for a movable-type printer for the first time, and planned to tear through lunch so that I could get to the workshop as soon as possible.

“Fran,” I said as he served my food, “I would like to wear throwaway clothes, since I might be getting dirty at the workshop this afternoon.”

He furrowed his brow at my request. “My sincere apologies, Lady Rozemyne, but under normal circumstances, the daughter of the archduke would never engage in the work herself. For that reason, you do not own any throwaway clothes.”

“Wait, what? But the ink stains will most likely be permanent. Will that not be a problem?” I asked, pinching the white sleeves of the High Bishop robes I usually wore and holding them up to him. Getting black ink on this white cloth would be a major issue, and I couldn’t imagine it was

acceptable for the High Bishop to go around wearing dirty clothes.

“There are still several robes in the orphanage director’s chambers from your days as an apprentice shrine maiden. Might I suggest using those? The only consideration is that you will need to change in the director’s chambers, and you should attempt to stay in your High Bishop robes as much as possible while in the temple.”

The only clothes in this closet were those suited to the High Bishop and the archduke’s adopted daughter. I had gone to the orphanage director’s chambers many times since becoming High Bishop, but as I wasn’t allowed to open its closets and the like myself, I hadn’t known that my old clothes were still in there. In fact, my assumption had been that they were burned or something to hide my commoner origins.

“...Oh, I had no idea they were still in there. Thank you ever so much, Fran.”

And so I headed to the orphanage director’s chambers with Monika and Damuel to change into something from my days as Myne. Amid the several sets of clothes in the closet, I found my Gilberta Company apprentice outfit that I used to wear, and my heart immediately twinged with nostalgia.

“I shall change into these. After all, these are the only clothes without frilly sleeves.”

Monika looked over the outfit, then nodded. “They are certainly the most suitable for work.”

I pushed my arms through the apprentice clothes, feeling an even stronger wave of nostalgia wash over me. They were a little tight on me, but nothing that I couldn’t wear. Plus, the fact that they were tighter meant I was actually growing to some extent. Though that, too, emphasized how much I had changed since being Myne, which was sad in its own way.

Gil finished his lunch just as I finished changing and came to join us in the director’s chambers.

“Monika, I shall head to the workshop with Gil. You may use this time to help Wilma. I imagine she is fairly busy right now, due to the illustration job I have given her.”

“As you wish. You may leave it to me.”

After sending Monika to the orphanage, I went to the workshop with Gil and Damuel.

“I’ve sent everyone outside, so you can go a little crazy with the

typesetting if you want," Gil said, proudly puffing out his chest.

Fritz had taken everyone to the forest so that I could handle things in the workshop myself. It was their first time going there for paper-making this spring, so they had all left in a rush of excitement.

Damuel gave a small smile, having been dragged along to all this. "I would rather you make it so that she doesn't go crazy at all."

"When books are involved, you would need the power of Mestionora, the Goddess of Wisdom, to keep Lady Rozemyne contained. Do you have such power at your disposal, Sir Damuel?" Gil asked, indirectly suggesting that he had absolutely no idea how to control me. There was no way I was going to hold back in the face of a new printing press, and it seemed Gil understood that as well as Lutz now.

"I see. In that case, I suppose I should pray to Mestionora later on," Damuel said, quickly giving up on containing my rampage himself and instead resorting to praying to the gods for help.

Well... if you're going out of your way to pray to Mestionora, you might as well ask her for some insider tips on how to further advance printing technology.

We reached the workshop soon enough. I spotted Lutz already lining up the necessary tools, so I called out to announce our arrival.

"Lutz, we're here."

"Myne?!" Lutz exclaimed, turning around with wide eyes. He then slapped a hand against his cheek and shook his head. "No. That's wrong. *Wrong*."

Knowing that he was surprised to see me wearing the apprentice outfit, I spun in place and struck a pose. "What do you think, Lutz? Brings back memories, doesn't it?"

"It's more confusing than anything. I mean, come on, I even messed up your name there. Wear something else next time," he replied with a pout.

"These were the only clothes with sleeves appropriate for working in. You might as well give up, because I'm gonna keep using them," I replied, already heading over to the typesetting stand. I grabbed the lowermost letter type case and grinned at the sight of the gleaming metal within. "Lutz, Gil —where are the composing sticks and the interline spacers?"

"All the small pieces that Ingo and Johann made are on this shelf," Lutz replied, revealing crisp rows of sticks and spacers.

I let out an emotional sigh. Words couldn't even begin to explain how beautiful the pieces looked, and the thought of printing with them genuinely moved me. But when I started checking all the drawers of the typesetting stand, I noticed something really bad.

Oh no... I can't reach the top.

"Gil, please fetch me something to stand on."

"Actually," Lutz began, "maybe we should just line up the letter type cases on a worktable? That way, we can all go through the process together."

I nodded in agreement, at which point Lutz and Gil started moving the cases. It was too bad, though; I'd wanted to look all cool working in front of the typesetting stand.

"Okay, time to start typesetting. Let's see... You did some before when you were printing the text for the picture books, right? This is basically the same, but since the books we're printing this time are filled with letters, we need to make the length of each line and the spaces between them uniform, so the text will be easy to read," I explained, handing the manuscript to Lutz and Gil. "Lutz, you typeset this page. And Gil, you take care of this one."

I placed the manuscript on the worktable, then handed them each a composing stick. These sticks were slender wooden boxes small enough to be held in one hand, and they were where the several rows of metal letter types would be assembled.

"First, place an interline spacer in your composing stick. Yes, I'm referring to the thin, long pieces of wood. Now add as many letters as you can fit. This will determine how long each line is, so make sure there aren't any sticking out. Once that's done, add another interline spacer, and then put a setting rule on top."

"Hey, what's the setting rule for, anyway?" Lutz asked, holding up the thin piece of metal and looking it over with a confused expression.

I put an interline spacer and then a setting rule in my own composing stick before starting to search for the first letter I needed. "The setting rule helps the metal letter types slide easier than they would on top of wood, and it helps to keep all the letters aligned neatly in place. Ah, there's the first letter. Got it." I grabbed the first letter from the case, made sure it was flipped vertically, then set it in the composing stick with a clink. "Always

start from this side of the stick, okay?”

“Got it.”

After that, nothing but the sound of clinking metal filled the workshop. When we finished each line of letters, we would set down an interline spacer, take out a setting rule, and then lay that down on top. Once that was done, we would begin lining up the next row of type.

Typesetting was very repetitious work.

“Mm, where’s the next one...? Oh, there it is.”

It was my first time doing this, so it took me a long time to find each letter. I noticed that Lutz and Gil were hunting for them with squinted eyes, too. Once we had several lines of text arranged in our composing sticks, we’d carefully move the pieces to the galley—a long tray for holding types—and then start adding letters to the now-empty composing stick all over again.

As I said, it was repetitious work.

“This sure takes a lotta time,” Lutz observed.

“We’ll get faster as we get used to it.”

I quickly got used to the process, meaning I was able to speedily line up my rows. But my energy quickly started to wane, and by the time I was halfway done with my page, I was already exhausted; squinting at the rows of tiny letter types had really tired my eyes out. When we had initially begun, I was enjoying myself and making good progress, but when we were finally finishing our pages, I was going the slowest out of everyone.

With the pages done, we delicately tied the arranged types together with typesetting string so that they wouldn’t fall out of place. I was so drained that I couldn’t actually manage to do mine, so Lutz had to handle it in my place.

“And that completes the galley. The typesetting’s done, so next up is making the galley proof. This stage will require us to use the printing press, so we might want to send word to Ingo, Zack, and Johann. Either way, for now, I’ll explain how to work the galleys into the printing press.”

I brought the filled-up galley over to the printing press, then put it in place. The printing press itself perfectly matched the blueprint we had agreed on, though that much was to be expected, given that it had been made by Johann. It had been arranged so that we could print double-page spreads—that is, both the left and right pages of an open book together—so Lutz set the second filled-up galley next to it. We then arranged furniture around the galleys to create the margins, before setting everything in place

with the wooden frame.

That marked the end of our preparations.

“Now we just need to rub on the ink and do a test print. See how there are marks on the frame? Line the paper up with those marks, then press this board down.”

It was set so that, when the paper was being held down by the cover, it could be folded such that it would be positioned right above the galleys. I compared the printing press blueprints with the real thing while continuing to explain how it worked.

“I’m pretty sure turning this handle will move the stand...”

“Yeah? Let me see it.”

I wasn’t strong enough to turn the handle myself, but Lutz and Gil could both manage it on their own. The stand moved just according to my specifications, which was incredible to see. As we were utilizing the principle of leverage, this new printing press hopefully wouldn’t require as much arm strength as the previous version, making it easier and less taxing to use.

“So, you can print by moving that handle. It won’t actually print right now, since we haven’t put any ink on the types, but try turning it anyway. It should be a lot easier to move than the earlier press.”

The old press had needed the strength of two adults, but Lutz and Gil were managing to operate this new one by themselves.

“Woah! That wasn’t tough at all. If we can start picking up the letter types quicker, this should make printing take no time at all,” Lutz said, his green eyes sparkling with excitement. Meanwhile, Gil was writing instructions for the entire process onto his diptych.

Once they both had everything down, our work for the day was done.

“...Okay, I understand now,” Gil said, looking up from his diptych. “We can bring Ingo and the others to the workshop tomorrow, then do the trial run.”

Lutz peered over his shoulder at the diptych, then nodded. “Yeah. And while they’re here, you’ll be watching—and *only* watching—like a good High Bishop. Did our work today scratch that itch for you?”

“Just a little. Enough for me to stay calm tomorrow.”

...Though it’s less that I’ve calmed down, and more that today’s work will probably leave me too exhausted to move much at all.

Ingo, Zack, and Johann came over to the workshop the next day. They were all wearing their work clothes in preparation for the printing test, so I alone stood out with my clean High Bishop robes.

“Now then, shall we begin the trial run for the new printing press? Gil, Lutz—please begin.”

They both nodded, then started putting together the galley proof as we had discussed, rubbing on the ink, putting the paper into place, and setting down the frame. Lutz turned the handle while Gil pushed the stand beneath the press as it moved, and everyone watched on with interest and nervousness. The craftsmen in particular observed the process with serious glares and furrowed brows.

Pushing the handle and using leverage to move the press made the press board itself move with a loud banging sound. Lutz and Gil pulled out the stand and undid the frame covering the paper, then removed the sheets from the press. The small mimeograph printer could only print one page at a time, but here we had printed two at once.

“Phew, they’re done. Real good quality, too.”

“So that’s printing, huh? I dunno what those pages actually say, but I’m impressed.”

With the trial run a success, the craftsmen all let out sighs of relief. I smiled upon seeing them all finally freed from the stress that came with having to deliver a working product.

“Thanks to you three combining your talents, we have improved the printing press into something truly wonderful,” I announced. “I shall direct the Gilberta Company to handle the rest of your payment and report your success to the guilds. Winter was a stressful time, was it not? Where exactly did you struggle the most?”

The stress-free craftsmen went on to explain their respective struggles to me.

“Well, Lady Rozemyne, I was busy all winter thanks to you calling me one of your Gutenbergs,” Johann murmured with a sigh.

I placed a hand on my cheek and tilted my head. “Busy all winter, you say? Should I take that to mean you have found a new patron? If so, I truly am overjoyed for you and would be more than willing to remove you from the Gutenbergs, comfortable in the knowledge that doing so will not deprive

you of work.”

“Ngh...” At that, Johann awkwardly averted his gaze, having clearly not found a new patron yet.

Benno’s Request

“With the galley proof done, we need to compare it with the manuscript and correct any mistakes. The more people doing this, the better, since there are going to be mistakes no matter how careful you are.”

Once the typo checking was done, the galleys were corrected and another proof was printed. Only once all of the mistakes were confirmed to have been fixed would we begin printing in bulk, and this process of typesetting and correcting any mistakes formed the repetitious bulk of printing.

“I am very satisfied with this printing press. I would like to order an identical one to send to Hasse.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” Ingo and Johann replied with nervous smiles. Zack, however, looked somewhat unsatisfied, likely because he hadn’t been involved in the actual construction.

Don’t worry, Zack. I have a lot more schematics for you to make.

In any case, by spreading the things I wanted around the world at once, I was causing some serious repercussions in all sorts of places. My influence was more significant than I ever would have thought, and that influence would undoubtedly create fierce competition between workshops, which wanted to make as much profit as possible. As a result, the Gilberta Company would get even more work, as they served as my representative and an intermediary between me and the workshops.

The problem is, I can’t just choose one workshop to give my exclusive business to.

I let out a sigh. Zack’s creativity and skill when it came to drawing up blueprints was very important to me, but so was Johann’s technical ability that flawlessly brought those schematics to life. There was no way to avoid giving work to them both, but the inevitable conflict this would cause between workshops was pretty rough.

It would be so much easier if they just combined their workshops into one.

I contemplated the idea for a moment, then looked over at Zack. “What would I need to do to make you the foreman of a new workshop, Zack?”

“Wha?!”

Zack immediately looked at me with wide eyes, while Ingo and Johann regarded me with bewildered stares as though I had morphed into some kind of talking feybeast. It seemed pretty clear that my suggestion was a little out of the ordinary, so I hurriedly explained my thought process.

“I simply figured that Zack and Johann establishing a workshop together would make it a lot easier for me to order things from them both.”

Since I couldn’t just give one of their workshops my exclusive business, my idea had been to establish a smithy containing only my personal craftsmen.

“Zack and Johann are from different smithies, so taking orders and distributing the pay has been a bit of a pain, right? Well, Zack is sociable and has a bright, active imagination, so I think he would be well suited to becoming a foreman, while Johann could provide his excellent skills to complete the ultimate workshop.”

“Hold on, hold on. Johann and I are both leherls, which means that, while we can inherit our current workshops—assuming our respective foremen choose us after we’ve gotten our beruf certifications, of course—we can’t become the foremen of new workshops.”

“Wait, really?”

Zack and Johann went on to explain that, while the contracts signed by lehanges were generally for three years of work, those signed by leherls tied them into a lifetime of employment with that particular workshop. This was done to help the workshop grow, but it also meant that leherls couldn’t go on to own workshops themselves. In other words, no matter where you went, people wanted to keep skilled workers to themselves.

“A leherl can have their contract nullified if they’re deemed useless or cause too many problems, but Zack and Johann are making a lot of money for their workshops,” Ingo added, providing the perspective of a foreman with a workshop. “I doubt their foremen are gonna let them go.”

Ingo had apparently aimed to become a foreman since he was a kid, having been confident in his skills from a young age and given some amount of support from his parents. He declined the leherl contracts offered to him and instead signed on as a lehange with various workshops to hone

his talents.

“I see... So that means it wouldn’t be feasible for me to establish a smithy exclusively for my Gutenbergs,” I lamented, at which point Johann repeatedly nodded in agreement. “It’s a shame, though. There were many large projects that I’d wished to start on, and I thought that having my own personal smithy would make giving the orders much easier. But I suppose that simply isn’t an option.”

“...Large projects?” Zack asked hesitantly.

I nodded. “Indeed. Would you care to design a (hand pump) for me so that we might draw water from the wells much more easily? I am willing to buy the schematic from you without hesitation. My intention is to give said schematic to the Smithing Guild for safekeeping, as this way, anyone will be able to make (hand pumps) for themselves in the future.”

“But... why?”

“Because the invention will earn more profit than a single workshop could ever use, and I would much rather it spread across the world at once. The struggle of drawing water is experienced universally, is it not?”

“Still, I don’t understand why you would publicize the schematics,” Zack replied. “You should always try to monopolize as much of the profit as you can.”

He and all the other craftsmen looked positively baffled; they were so used to prioritizing earnings for their own workshops that they simply could not understand my desire to begin circulating convenient quality of life products.

Well, if all commoners think the same way about this, maybe I should figure out a way to earn profit from it just so the craftsmen can understand me better. Maybe I could use this as an opportunity to popularize the concept of a royalty fee...

“While I shall allow the Smithing Guild to manage the schematics, I won’t be releasing the (hand pumps) for free. I intend to sign a magic contract to the effect that, for each one made, Zack and I will be paid a small fee—for designing the product and inventing it, respectively.”

“...I see. That’ll get you some profit while spreading the product around for sure,” Ingo replied, nodding a few times while stroking his cheek. Zack also nodded in understanding now that I was talking about being paid.

“What exactly is this thing that you’re talking about, Lady Rozemyne? I

can only guess it’s as weird as everything else you’ve come up with.”

“Well, yes. You’re right. It’s pretty weird.”

I explained the theory behind the hand pump’s operation as best and as simply as I could. Back in my Urano days, I had researched the subject during a social studies class in which we compared life in the past and present. My group had tasked me with heading to the library and doing the research, which was somewhat of a treasured memory since I was so rarely trusted with things.

That said, I hadn’t actually made a pump myself. The best I could do was draw out a rough illustration and provide a broad explanation, but Zack listened on regardless, his gray eyes shining with competitive light.

“So, when you move this part here, these parts move and open the valve... Okay. I think I get it. I’ll try drawing up some designs.”

“Do your best, noble Gutenberg.”

I tapped guild cards with Lutz to pay the remaining fees for the printing press, the cost of the new printing press that would be sent to Hasse, and the down payment for the hand pump schematics. I would leave dividing the money between the craftsmen, delivering the reports to the guilds, and so on to the Gilberta Company.

“Lady Rozemyne, Master Benno was entrusted with this,” Lutz said, handing a letter to Gil, who then gave it to me.

I opened it right then and there, and inside was a brief message stating that Hugo wished to become a court chef. It seemed that he had finished training his successor in the Italian restaurant.

“If possible, he would like to receive your introduction,” Lutz added.

It ultimately fell on the archduke to decide who to hire as a court chef. Sylvester had previously given him a direct, off-the-record invitation, but no formal documents had been shared or signed; without me throwing in a word for him, he probably wouldn’t even be able to enter the castle or the Noble’s Quarter again.

“In the end, he didn’t find a new partner before the Star Festival...”

...Oh, right. His girlfriend rejected him or something. What with Hugo and Damuel, it feels like every guy around me has been getting turned down recently.

Feeling sad about how unsuccessful everyone around me was with romance, I looked toward Lutz. “Please tell Benno to send Hugo with you

next time so that we might discuss this in person."

"As you wish."

Three days later, Benno and Lutz visited the orphanage director's chambers with Hugo in tow. He had been made to wear his best outfit and was practically shrinking in fear as his eyes frantically surveyed his surroundings. It was honestly kind of funny seeing him like that. He had never come up to the second floor when he had been working here as my chef, so I could tell that he felt out of place.

After we finished exchanging our greetings and had taken our seats, Fran came over to pour our tea. Like a proper noble, I sipped my tea first and took a demonstrative bite out of the new sweets that Ella had prepared. She had put her all into making them upon hearing that Hugo would be coming—langues de chat separated by cream and jam made from seasonal fruit. She really had been burning with motivation to show her former teacher just how much she had grown.

Nicola had told me this information, laughing all the while.

"Here you are. These are new sweets prepared by Ella."

In an instant, Hugo's small, anxious expression morphed into that of a chef. He straightened his back and examined the sweets with narrowed eyes before picking one up, giving it a closer look from various angles, and placing it in his mouth.

As he swallowed, his expression turned into a frown. "Gah! She's improved too friggin' much..." he murmured, vexed. It seemed that Ella's all-out attempt to make the best sweets ever had successfully wounded Hugo's pride.

"So, Hugo wishes to become a court chef now...?" I asked, broaching the subject.

Benno nodded. "I am told he received an invitation from the archduke himself, but no formal documents were provided. We hoped that you might send word of his decision for us, Lady Rozemyne."

"Is the Italian restaurant prepared to lose Hugo? What did the co-owner, Freida, have to say about this?" I asked.

As it turned out, both Benno and Freida had agreed that an Italian restaurant chef going on to become a court chef in the castle would bring nothing but good publicity for them.

“I see. In that case, I have no qualms about sending word that Hugo may become a court chef.”

Benno sighed in relief, then crossed his arms in front of his chest with a word of gratitude. Hugo did the same.

I gave them a brisk nod, then glanced at Hugo for some final confirmation. “Please understand, though—you will receive entirely different accommodation from when you were staying in the castle to teach the other court chefs my recipes. You will not begin as a teacher, but rather as an entry-level cook. Is that acceptable to you? At the moment, you hold the prized position of head chef at the Italian restaurant. Becoming a court chef will send you back to the bottom.”

“Even so, this is what I want,” Hugo replied, determinedly clenching his fists in his lap.

“Furthermore, the recipes that I have taught you up until now have been protected by magic contracts. You will no longer be able to spread new recipes once you are hired as a court chef, and I cannot predict how the other chefs will treat you.”

“Master Benno said that, too. But I still want to do this,” Hugo said. His resolve was as firm as iron; he wanted to become a court chef no matter what position it put him in.

“This is also important, but if you enter the Noble’s Quarter as a court chef, you will no longer be able to return to the lower city without your boss’s permission. You have a family, do you not? Are you okay with being separated from them? Have they agreed to this?”

Benno lowered his eyes a little, knowing that I had been forced to leave my own family, but Hugo was unfazed. He simply responded that he desired to become a court chef, even if that meant leaving his family.

“Why do you so strongly wish to become a court chef? I’m curious, since you didn’t seem so invested in the power that the position offered before. Are you unsatisfied with the Italian restaurant? You may tell us if you are having any particular issues as a chef, so that we might correct them for both you and the others.”

“No, I don’t have any problems with the workplace. It’s just, well... It’s kind of a personal reason, and...” Hugo trailed off uncomfortably, at which point Benno started to explain for him, his serious expression belying the amusement in his eyes.

It turned out that Hugo’s ex-girlfriend had started dating one of his neighbors, and seeing them acting all lovey-dovey every single day had driven him to want to leave his home and become a court chef as soon as possible.

Oh... So it didn’t just end with him getting rejected, huh? That’s... That’s honestly pretty sad.

“If you wish to find a new special someone, it would be much wiser to continue working in the Italian restaurant; I am certain you are much more likely to find someone else there. As you surely know already, the court chefs are almost exclusively men.” I had researched the castle’s kitchens out of concern over Ella going there, so I already knew what the male:female ratio was like.

My observation made Hugo grunt uncomfortably, then firmly shake his head. “I’ve already decided to dedicate my life to cooking!”

“It is your life, Hugo; as long as you don’t make a choice you will regret, I am happy to assist. But if you wish to become a court chef solely to escape your current home and workplace, I am willing to hire you with room and board as my personal chef. How does that sound?” I asked with a smile.

Hugo’s eyes bulged at the offer. As far as I was concerned, it would be a waste for a chef as skilled as him to be stuck doing low-level manual labor in the kitchen. Not to mention, as he was going to be leaving the Italian restaurant either way, I would much rather get him under my wing to avoid having to teach my recipes to yet more people.

“I was considering hiring more personal chefs, as Ella is struggling to manage everything on her own. You two have already spent much time together, and I know that your skills are more than satisfactory. You also won’t have to start at the bottom in my kitchen.”

“Er, but... I told my family that I’m going to become a court chef, and I’m quitting the Italian restaurant, too. Backing down now would just be kinda...”

Lame, and laughable to anyone who heard. In short, his pride as a man was at stake.

“Becoming my personal chef would mean following me as I travel between the castle and the temple, which, from a lower city perspective, is practically the same as being a court chef.”

Hugo blinked, froze for a moment, and then shook his head.

Ahh, he's uncertain. Good, good. Time to pile on the pressure and make him bend.

"Plus, you would not be wasting any of the knowledge you previously acquired. Your position would allow you to make all the recipes you have already learned, as well as potential new ones—I intend to send new recipes to the Italian restaurant as well, after all. Oh, and not to mention, in my service, you will have access to the newest cooking utensils before anyone else."

Hugo's eyes flickered to and fro, his interest drawn to the new cooking utensils. Benno, who was sitting beside him, watched on silently with an amused grin creeping onto his face.

"You may also request to go to the lower city while I am staying at the temple. That would surely bring comfort to your family, would it not?"

Hugo's head was swaying side to side, as if mirroring his wavering heart. One more push would do it.

"Not to mention, my kitchen has Ella. Nicola and Monika often work there as assistants, too. Would you not rather work in a kitchen full of cute girls than the stuffy, man-filled one in the castle?"

"Lady Rozemyne, I think I'll take you up on your offer."

He finally folded with a deadly serious look on his face, signing the contract through Benno, who was holding a hand over his mouth to contain his laughter. And thus, Hugo, too, became my personal chef.

"I'll have your room prepared by tomorrow, so have your things ready. Monika, take Hugo to the High Bishop's chambers and show him the kitchen. He need only see where he is going to work."

"As you wish. Hugo, please follow me."

At that, Monika led Hugo out of the orphanage director's chambers. In stark contrast to when he had come in, he looked so pleased that I thought he might even start humming along the way.

After watching Hugo disappear down the stairs, I turned to Benno. "I've settled on a date for training Otto and the others."

The training would be done while I was at the castle during the Archduke Conference. My temple attendants were permitted a fair amount of flexibility while I was away, so that would be the perfect opportunity for them to instruct others.

Meanwhile, I would be reading as many books as I wanted in the castle book room... or at least, I deeply wished that was the case. Ferdinand had instead instructed me to join Wilfried in performing Mana Replenishment while the archduke was absent and attending the conference.

“I thank you greatly for your consideration during these busy times,” Benno said, glancing toward the hidden room. He probably wanted to talk about something else in there, so I gave a prompt nod and stood from my seat.

“Damuel, Gil—we are moving to the other room.”

And so, I entered the hidden room with Benno, Gil, and Damuel, taking a seat once we were inside. Benno sat down as well and met my gaze, at which point he dropped his superficial merchant smile to reveal a sharp scowl.

“Did something happen, Benno?”

“You know I’ve been doing more business with nobles lately, right?”

“Yes. Lutz tells me about your complaining through Gil all the time,” I replied.

It turned out that Elvira approaching him while we were selling learning materials at the castle had led to the Gilberta Company getting an immediate surge in noble connections, and they had been up to their elbows in work ever since.

“I’m getting more and more inquiries about the learning materials made by your workshop. Not just from nobles, either—from rich commoners as well. And that’s made the owners of other large stores run complaining to the Guild about how the Gilberta Company’s supposed to be a clothing store,” Benno said, scratching his head with a sigh.

“I’ve spread too far out,” he continued. “Other stores normally wouldn’t get up in arms about something like this, but you’re involved with it all, and every new business I step into is raking in obscene amounts of profit. People are being increasingly obnoxious about how much business I have with nobles now.”

When combined with Freida and the guildmaster getting involved, the fact that Benno wasn’t really visiting the Italian restaurant much had given other stores the impression that he was merely another investor. But even had this not been an issue, Benno’s decision to stay involved with me had gotten him increasingly more work in the printing industry and thus more

noble customers, leaving the other large store owners clamoring for a piece of the pie.

“Barely any of my new noble customers even realize that the Gilberta Company is a clothing store, which is gonna make it harder for Corinna and Renate to take over. That’s why, once you’ve finished training Otto, my plan is to split off from the Gilberta Company and make a store solely for the printing business. This can hopefully be done before that new fashion you’re trying to spread hits the scene.”

Benno’s plan was to divide the store in two so that the profits he was earning from me weren’t concentrated on a single business. I wasn’t sure whether that would actually work, but I wasn’t an expert on inter-merchant relationships and didn’t really have a reason to disagree.

“So you, Mark, and Lutz are going to start a new store specifically for books?”

“Yeah. All the big store owners who want in on this new industry that the archduke’s started are each going to be sending a lehange to this new place,” he explained.

As it turned out, the real reason he was splitting the store was because he didn’t want those outsider lehanges in the Gilberta Company, but I didn’t understand why he was being forced to accept them in the first place. Truly, the world of merchants was a mysterious place.

“What do you need me to do, then?”

“I need a name. Could you think something up that makes it clear to everyone that the new store has your backing?”

Benno explained that the Gilberta Company’s founder had started by requesting a store name from a noble. They were told to use the name “Gilberta,” which the founder actually adopted as their own name as well.

“Um... Does that mean the new store’s going to be called the Rozemyne Company? Is your new name going to be ‘Rozemyne’ too, Benno?”

“I’m not taking the name. And if you *are* gonna give me one, at least make it male! But to answer your question, no, it doesn’t have to be your name. You can come up with whatever you want.”

Unperturbed by Benno’s outburst of anger, I started considering ideas. I had already used “Gutenberg” as a title for people, but there was nothing stopping me from using the name of someone else involved with the printing industry. And of course, I knew more than a few such names.

“It would be confusing for the store to have the same name as the Rozemyne Workshop, so what about going with the Plantin Company instead?”

“...Where’d that name come from?”

“It’s a secret,” I said with a pleased smile, knowing full well that he wouldn’t understand the reference even if I explained it to him.

Christophe Plantin was a man who had dedicated his life to printing books and notably produced the Plantin Polyglot Bible. Incidentally, Plantin’s printing workshop in Belgium was considered a World Heritage Site; the Plantin-Moretus Museum was actually located there, and I had wanted to see it with my own eyes someday.

“Plantin, huh? Well, I’ll just be glad you didn’t go with Gutenberg again.”

“They come from a similar place. But more importantly, Benno, I really think you should start going by the name ‘Plantin’ now.”

“Never.”

He shot me down instantly. But on second thought, it *would* be confusing to actually have him change his name like that, so this was fine with me. The more important thing was learning from Plantin’s example and advancing the printing industry such that we could have twenty printing presses working at full throttle all at once.

“Benno, Benno. Let’s make as many books as we can and sell them at the Plantin Company. I want a workshop that can fit twenty whole printing presses inside.”

I would be fine with either a new printing workshop or expanding the existing Rozemyne Workshop to fit more printing presses. But my most purest of dreams only made Benno grimace hard, then flick me on the forehead.

“Didn’t the High Priest tell you to learn some patience?”

“Oh, right, he did. Gotta contain myself... Or, actually, can I just stay like this? I’d much rather go nuts.”

“Of course you can’t, idiot!”

Benno unleashed his thunder, and as he started grinding his knuckles against my head, a sense of peace and nostalgic solace washed over my heart. Oh, how I’d missed these days.

...B-But I wouldn’t mind him being a little more gentle! Not grinding so

hard would be nice, too! Please!

Staying Home During the Archduke Conference

“Fran, I entrust you with training Benno’s men while I am at the castle. Zahm, help him as much as you can.”

I needed to supply mana to Ehrenfest’s foundation while the archduke and archduchess were staying in the Sovereignty for the Archduke Conference, so I would be living in the castle from today until the spring coming of age ceremony.

“Rozemyne, it is time to go,” Ferdinand called out.

I gestured for Ella, Hugo, and Rosina to climb into my highbeast. Brigitte would be riding shotgun, as always, and Damuel would be guarding our rear while we followed after Ferdinand. Hugo let out a pretty pathetic shriek the moment we began to ascend, but he quickly shut his mouth when Ella started laughing at him. She was used to flying by now.

“Pfff. You’ll be fine, Hugo; there’s nothing to scream about,” Ella said. “We all got used to flying in no time.” I found it amusing that, while she spoke very matter-of-factly, her voice seemed a little brighter than usual. Maybe she was having fun teasing Hugo.

“I was as shocked as you the first time I flew,” Rosina added, “but now I find the experience more comfortable than riding in carriages. Your reaction is quite normal.”

“Rosina...! Right, Ella—switch seats with her,” Hugo said, sounding openly moved. I knew he was just glad to have a beautiful woman like Rosina in his corner, but *wow*, talk about being blatant.

“Nobody’s allowed to change seats while Lady Rozemyne’s flying her highbeast, so *toooo bad*,” Ella shot back, turning her head away with a pout.

Rosina let out an amused giggle. I wished that I were back there having fun, too.

“Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne. And welcome back once again, Lord Ferdinand. We have already prepared for your arrival,” Norbert greeted us

when we arrived.

I wasn't sure what preparations he was talking about, but Ferdinand gave a calm nod as he put away his highbeast.

Norbert looked over my three personnel once they had exited my Pandabus, then immediately started giving them orders. "Chefs, please head to the kitchen. Attendants, carry their things. Ottilie, take the musician to Lady Rozemyne's room. As a note, Damuel and Brigitte, you will not be permitted entry to where they are headed, so you may change places with Cornelius and take some time off."

"Yes, sir!"

Damuel and Brigitte both took a step back and then kneeled. Meanwhile, Hugo and Ella went with the attendants carrying their belongings to the kitchen, as instructed, while Rosina followed Ottilie to the northern building with her harspiel.

"Lady Rozemyne, please prepare your highbeast. We shall be walking through the main building for quite some time."

It seemed that we weren't heading straight to my room. I morphed Lessy into a one-seater and got inside.

"Please follow me."

I drove behind Norbert and Ferdinand in my one-woman Pandabus. Eckhart and Cornelius were following as guard knights, while Rihyarda accompanied us as an attendant. Together, we entered the main castle building through the back entrance, then climbed some steps to the archduke's office.

"Aub Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand have arrived."

Waiting inside were the archduke and archduchess, their guard knights and attendants, Wilfried, Lamprecht, and Oswald. Sylvester stood up as soon as we reached the door.

"Ah, there you are. Let's go."

No sooner had Ferdinand and I entered than Lamprecht and Eckhart stepped outside as guards, planting their feet firmly in place and crossing their arms. The attendants then closed the door behind them, after which Cornelius and a guard knight who served Florencia similarly guarded it from the inside.

"What in the world is going on?" I asked Ferdinand, tugging on his sleeve. The sudden tension in the air was making me a little intimidated.

He looked down at me and raised an eyebrow. “Did I not explain? You are going to pour mana into the foundation’s magic.”

Ferdinand’s explanation had ultimately been fairly brief, and I was pretty sure that he’d said it wouldn’t be any different from offering mana to the divine instruments or pouring it into the chalices for the Dedication Ritual. Whoever could have guessed that it was actually something this serious and closely guarded?

“...I didn’t expect there to be so many guards.”

“This matter concerns the magic that forms Ehrenfest’s very foundation,” Ferdinand replied. “No amount of security can be considered exorbitant.” It seemed that the only ones still present in the room were the archducal family and archnobles closely related to them by blood.

Sylvester jutted out his chin, directing Rihyarda and Oswald to undo the tapestry behind his desk. Once it had been removed, I saw that there was a small door behind it. The entrance was fairly small—so much so that even I, of all people, would need to duck my head to pass through. Basically, it was more of a smallish window than a door. On its front were seven round holes, four of which were filled with feystones that resembled marbles.

“Rozemyne, Wilfried—grip these and register your mana with them,” Sylvester instructed, handing us each one of the marble-like feystones.

I dyed mine, turning it a light yellow, while Wilfried clutched his to do the same. Then, once we were done, Sylvester fitted our mana-filled feystones into two of the slots.

“You can both go through the door now,” he said. “Follow me.”

The archducal couple removed their gloves, handing them to their respective attendants. Sylvester then held his hand before the door, prompting it to swiftly grow in size until it was tall enough for even Ferdinand to walk through normally. He opened the enlarged door, but there was a rainbow-colored barrier of some kind that blocked me from seeing what was inside.

Sylvester entered first, then Florencia. I looked around to see who would step through next, at which point Ferdinand placed a hand on Wilfried’s back and urged him forward. “Go on.”

Wilfried quickly turned around, a surprised look on his face.

“Wilfried, my boy, it’s time for you and Lady Rozemyne to serve as the archduke’s children for the first time,” Rihyarda said with a kind smile,

trying to ease the nerves that had frozen him in place. “It’ll be hard work, but we shall pray that everything goes just fine for you.”

“Shall we enter, Wilfried?” I asked. “Or would you like me to go first?”

“No. I’ll go first.”

With that, Wilfried took a deep breath, shut his eyes tight, and stepped through the door.

Ferdinand signaled with his eyes for me to go next. I pushed past the rainbow field, which was like trying to move through a sticky net, and entered the room beyond the door.

“Wooow!”

It’s so fantasy! I cried out silently.

I had seen a lot of magic-related things over the past few years, but this entire room was just classic fantasy. It was pure white without any carpets or tapestries, and floating in the center was a feystone slightly larger than a watermelon. Spinning steadily around it were intricate magic circles that had been woven together, with the bands of shining mana forming complex letters and designs in an interlocking pattern. It all made the feystone look like some sort of celestial globe, albeit without a stand holding it up.

“Rozemyne, you are in the way. Keep moving forward,” Ferdinand said with a glare as he entered last.

I hurriedly moved to the side. “Ferdinand, what in the world is this room?”

“The hall in which Mana Replenishment is performed—the pouring of mana into Ehrenfest’s foundation. It is made such that only the archduke and archduchess can enter, along with any members of the archducal family who have their mana registered with the door.”

At the moment, only a few people could enter the room: the archduke and archduchess; their children, Wilfried and I; the previous archduke’s son, Ferdinand; and finally Bonifatius—Karstedt’s father, my grandfather, and the son of the archduke two generations ago. The feystone registering Veronica’s mana had been removed upon her arrest.

That makes sense. We really wouldn’t want her causing any problems here.

“This feystone is connected to the foundational magic.”

“Does that mean it’s not the foundational magic in itself?”

“Correct. That is located elsewhere, in a place that only the archduke

can enter.”

Sylvester nodded before adding on to Ferdinand’s explanation. “The location is hidden so that daughters who get married away, sons who become retainers, and spouses from other duchies don’t learn where the foundation is. Only the ruling archduke or archduchess controls it directly.”

The archduke was thus the only person who knew where the foundation was. The tight security surrounding it made sense, since it was quite literally the foundation that the entire duchy was built on.

“Rozemyne, Wilfried—you will pour mana into the foundation here while Florencia and I are at the Archduke Conference,” Sylvester announced, surprising the two of us more than anyone. I looked between him and Ferdinand.

“Just the two of us...? How have you been managing before now?”

“Last year, Mother and Ferdinand carried the burden for us. The incident occurred midway through it, and my uncle, Bonifatius, picked up the slack for us.”

It had been during last year’s Archduke Conference that the previous High Bishop was arrested and Sylvester’s mother imprisoned for criminal acts. I was subsequently assigned to be the new High Bishop, and Ferdinand ended up having to take on over half of my work, in addition to his own as High Priest. He was hardly in a position to be frequently leaving the temple, and as a result, they were in quite the bind when it came to performing Mana Replenishment this year. It wasn’t normally something to be done by kids who hadn’t even entered the Royal Academy, but with the current mana shortage, extreme measures needed to be taken.

“The process of supplying the mana will prove largely similar to what you already do with the divine instruments,” Ferdinand said. “I thus determined that it would be more efficient to send you to the castle than for me to frequently leave the temple.”

...I don’t know how to do temple paperwork or properly deal with nobles yet, so, well... that was definitely the right call.

As I nodded in agreement to myself, Sylvester pulled out a feystone about as large as a ping-pong ball from the leather pouch on his hip. He handed it to Wilfried.

“For the Mana Replenishment, I entrust you with this—a feystone filled with mana. Draw out the mana inside and pour it into the foundation.”

Wilfried proudly took the feystone, which closely resembled the ones Ferdinand had given Kampfer and Frietack during the Dedication Ritual. I could more or less guess whose mana was inside, but he probably had no idea what was going on. It seemed unlikely that they were planning to tell him, either; Ferdinand certainly wasn't saying anything.

"I'm going to leave this bag here," Sylvester continued. "Keep using these feystones for the Mana Replenishment, and put any drained ones into this other bag."

At that, he placed the two bags—one filled with feystones and the other empty—in the corner of the room. Leaving them here was apparently the best security one could ask for.

"We're all going to be filling the foundation with mana today, so it should last until the end of the Archduke Conference, but I don't want to return to find it almost entirely empty. It is also important for you two to learn the supply process in the event of extraordinary circumstances. As practice, spend each day filling the foundation with small amounts of mana," Sylvester said, walking directly beneath the feystone floating amid the spinning magic circles. He knelt and placed his hands upon the floor, and in an instant, both the floor and walls lit up, shining patterns and letters appearing on them in a similar fashion to the magic circles.

"Come, Rozemyne. This is your position. Kneel in place and pour your mana into this specific location every time," Ferdinand instructed, pointing at a magic circle on the ground. In its center was a symbol representing the Goddess of Wind.

I did as instructed, at which point Ferdinand walked over to another circle and kneeled as well. Wilfried was kneeling in a third circle, with Florencia doing the same beside him to teach her son how to use the feystone. We ended up in a triangle of sorts, with Sylvester in the middle.

With everyone in place, we placed our hands firmly against the ground. Ferdinand checked that everything was in order, then gave Sylvester a small confirming nod.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," Sylvester intoned, his voice echoing pleasantly through the ritual hall. It was the same prayer that I had heard many times before during the Dedication Ritual, and so I repeated the chant without any problems at all.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might.”

I could feel my mana being sucked out of me, and it was easy to see where it was going thanks to the flow of light coursing through the entire room. The magic circles surrounding the feystone moved with increasing energy, and I looked around with my palms still on the floor until Sylvester eventually called out, “Enough,” signaling for us to stop.

I removed my hands from the magic circle and stood up. To my side, I could see Florencia, peering down at Wilfried as he remained on the ground.

“Are you well, Wilfried?”

“I’m fine, Mother.”

But despite his assurance, it was clear that Wilfried had overexerted himself. He looked sick, and his shoulders sagged with exhaustion; it was the first time he had used such an enormous quantity of mana all at once. This much was to be expected, though—even the blue priests in the temple had ended up drained from the Dedication Ritual, so of course a child such as Wilfried would as well.

Sylvester scanned the room, his eyes widening in surprise as he reached me. “You certainly look well, Rozemyne. I’d thought a sickly girl like you would be the first to collapse.”

“I do this every day during the Dedication Ritual, so I’ve gotten used to it, whether I like it or not. Plus, it’s not like using mana requires physical strength, so...”

“You’re used to *this*? Ferdinand, just how hard are you working Rozemyne?”

“Remind me—who was it that gave us more chalices to fill and sent us around the entire Central District to boost the duchy’s harvest? I am not the one working Rozemyne to the bone here. I am giving her more leeway than I have to, *and* I am giving her potions,” Ferdinand said, holding up his head and glaring at Sylvester.

As far as I was concerned, having potions at the ready didn’t make it okay to completely overwork me.

But you know... Wow. Everyone really has *been working me to the bone. I did kind of notice it myself, but it's shocking to hear someone else say it for once.*

With the Mana Replenishment complete, I was instructed to rest in my room until supper. I gladly did just that, having Rihyarda fetch me a book.

"Milady, reading books can hardly be called rest, can it?"

"I feel most at peace while reading. There is no greater rest for me."

In what felt like the blink of an eye, it was time for supper. Wilfried was already at the dinner table when I arrived, still seeming rather tired; the same sickly expression from before was clear on his face. In retrospect, that was probably how I looked when I was being broken to pieces by my Devouring heat, and looking at him reminded me of the days when I would end up bedridden from exhaustion each time my mana went on a rampage.

...I sure have gotten stronger, huh?

As I reflected on just how long a road I had walked to reach this point, Ferdinand suddenly expressed his frustration. "Are you listening to me, Rozemyne?!"

"Not at all. May I ask that you repeat yourself?"

Ferdinand massaged his temples as the archducal couple held back their laughter. I blinked innocently in response, at which point he simply let out a sigh and continued.

"You shall stay in the castle, supplying mana until the spring coming of age ceremony. I assume you know this already, but I wish to emphasize that you are *not* to cause trouble. Focus on your business here, and take care not to do anything unnecessary."

"Of course! Fear not—I'll stay in the book room and cause no problems whatsoever! I won't do anything but read," I said with a big nod, finally in my element.

Sylvester started to say that, with me in the book room, they really didn't have anything to fear, but Ferdinand interrupted him with a firm headshake.

"Sylvester, there can be no relaxing with her. She truly intends to do nothing but read. That is why we must continually give her tasks to complete."

Ngh. He saw right through me.

"You're too cruel, Ferdinand. Would you truly deny me my blessed

reading time?!”

“Silence. Maintaining a balanced life is even more important for one as weak and sickly as you. We must assign Rihyarda to keep a constant watch on you, to ensure that you dedicate time to Mana Replenishment, your studies, and exercise, without fail. There is nothing more dangerous than giving you too many books.”

After finishing supper with us, Ferdinand instructed Rihyarda to monitor me closely, then returned to the temple. I could see my reading time vanish before my very eyes.

Curse you, Ferdinand! Why do you have to be so mean?!

“Goodbye, Father. Mother,” Wilfried intoned.

“We wish you a safe journey,” I added, following his lead.

Three days after my arrival at the castle, it was time to see off the archducal couple and Karstedt, the knight commander, on their way to the Archduke Conference. Several guard knights, attendants, and scholars had already been sent on their way, with the only remaining family being Wilfried, Elvira, my brothers, and me.

“Elvira, I entrust things to you in my absence.”

“Indeed, Karstedt. You may count on me.”

While my family was saying their goodbyes, Karstedt and Elvira looked over, which was my signal to intrude into their circle.

“I wish you well at work, Father.”

“Indeed. Be sure to fulfill your duties well, Rozemyne. *Ahem*... My father remains at the castle. Should anything happen, you may ask him for help; he would never refuse a request from his granddaughter.”

It seemed that, in the absence of the archducal couple, Bonifatius would be the one ruling Ehrenfest. I didn’t know too much about him, since I had only briefly greeted him during my baptism and winter socializing, but the way he was built made him immediately identifiable as a musclehead just like Karstedt and my brothers. He hadn’t joined us in saying our goodbyes, as he was already in the middle of performing his duties as the acting archduke.

“That’ll be all,” Sylvester said, stepping onto the teleportation circle. “I’m counting on you two.”

“Don’t slack on your studies now, Wilfried,” Florencia added, following

suit with Karstedt.

The circle shone, and with a flash of light, they were gone. It was such a quick farewell that I was a little taken aback.

Just as the loneliness was starting to set in, Elvira turned my way. “Rozemyne, I feel it has been quite some time since we last spoke like this.”

“It has been hard for us to meet lately. Would you like to talk for a bit, Mother?”

I interpreted her words as an indirect request for me to invite her to tea, and so I did just that. She nodded in satisfaction, which meant I had guessed correctly.

And so, Rihyarda prepared drinks for us in a nearby waiting room. I would be having my tea with Elvira here rather than in the northern building as, with the archducal couple gone, there was no one available to permit her entry.

Once our tea had been poured at my request, we were served some of Ella’s sweets, with Elvira only reaching for some after I had taken a demonstrative first bite. She then sipped her tea, regarding me with a steady gaze.

“Rozemyne. There is something I must ask you.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“I summoned the Gilberta Company to our estate yesterday, and I was informed of something most interesting during their visit. It seems you have designed a new style of dress for one of your female knights, hm?” she said, her intense smile seeming to add, *“You did not inform me about this.”*

I inhaled sharply. “Th-The style currently in fashion didn’t suit her very well, so I simply designed something that would. I, um... did not think it was necessary to inform you of this, Mother.”

Elvira let out a sigh. “Show me the dress, if you would, so that I might see what style you intend to popularize.”

“Mother, I don’t intend to start a new trend with this outfit.”

“...Come again?” Elvira asked, placing a hand over her mouth and widening her eyes in disbelief.

“Um, well... Any given fashion has some type of person it doesn’t suit, don’t you agree? All I want is for this style of dress to be available to those who have been excluded by the current trend; I don’t intend to popularize it

among all the women of Ehrenfest.”

If the sleeveless gown I was making for Brigitte ended up becoming the predominant fashion, there would inevitably be some prim and proper ladies worrying about it not suiting them. Nobody could control the ebb and flow of current trends, but ultimately, I just wanted everyone to have the freedom to wear the clothes they looked best in.

“Rozemyne, who in the world does the current fashion not suit?”

“I think it looks wonderful on smaller, more slender women, but not muscular, more athletic women like my guard knight Brigitte. The dresses look too wide on them, and make their broader shoulders even more pronounced than usual.”

Elvira paused in thought for a moment, no doubt envisioning Brigitte, then nodded. “Quite.”

“Isn’t it unfortunate that women like her have to participate in the Starbind Ceremony wearing clothes that don’t suit them? All I want to do is give them other options, not start an entirely new trend.”

Elvira shook her head in response, looking at me with a stern expression. “That simply will not do. If we do not establish that you are creating a new trend in fashion, everyone will simply perceive Brigitte’s new dress as strange and out of place.”

It was apparently important to inform noble society that I was designing a new style of dress for my guard knight, such that everyone else in attendance would regard her with envy. I didn’t really understand noble society too well yet, so I decided it would probably be smart to follow Elvira’s advice here—after all, it would completely defeat the purpose if my efforts did nothing but bring shame to Brigitte.

“I will examine this new fashion of yours. The fitting has already taken place, yes? When will the temporary sewing be completed?”

“I informed the Gilberta Company that there was no rush, given that I will be absent from the temple for some time. I imagine they will finish some time after the spring coming of age ceremony.”

“That is much too late. Instruct them to hurry and summon them to the castle.”

The dress would be unveiled to Elvira’s faction in its temporary sewing state so that everyone could see what kind of new fashion we were putting into place here. I was told that it would be best to invite several women of a

similar build to Brigitte who would thus be especially interested in the style, earning the envy of all those present. Establishing trends sure seemed to be a lot of work.

“I don’t mind the temporary sewing being done at the castle, but could you send word to them for me, Mother? I won’t be able to contact them without returning to the temple.”

“Very well. I shall contact the Gilberta Company myself.”

Sorry, Benno and Corinna... Seems like this just turned into a rush job!

Payment and Unveiling the Dress

Life in the castle was comfortable. After waking up, I would read until breakfast, and since mornings weren't rushed like they were in the temple, I actually got a lot of reading done. It really was nice.

Truly, waking up early is a virtue.

After breakfast, Wilfried and I would head to the Order's training grounds. Each day, he practiced swinging a wooden, sword-shaped stick, but that was too much for me. I needed to focus on moving around and building up enough stamina that I wouldn't collapse out of nowhere, so instead, I did what was essentially radio calisthenics—a series of warm-up exercises performed to guidance from a radio broadcast—from memory under Eckhart's supervision.

"Is that all you can do, Rozemyne?"

"Just so you know, (radio calisthenics) can get really exhausting really fast if you take it seriously."

I kept my head held high despite the shocked looks of all those around me, then walked a lap around the training grounds to complete my morning exercise routine. It may not have seemed like much, but by the time I was done, I was totally drained.

Third bell marked the end of training, at which point we moved to Wilfried's room for our morning lessons together. As he could read and do a little math now, geography and history lessons had been inserted into his schedule without me noticing.

"No fair!" I exclaimed. "You don't even care about new books, so why did you get to read them first?!"

Wilfried had received a head start with geography and history, but it ultimately only took me a couple of days to catch up to him. Now it was his turn to pout.

"How do you learn things so fast, Rozemyne?! It takes me forever to memorize anything!"

"I have an advantage, since I've traveled through much of the duchy for

the Harvest Festival and Spring Prayer. The tax official who accompanied me at the time taught me all about their respective exports, hence why I'm already so familiar with them."

And so, we continued our studies, at each other's throats the entire time. We were currently in the middle of studying the important events in Ehrenfest's history, starting from the point where Sylvester and Wilfried's direct ancestor became the archduke. It was pretty interesting stuff; Sylvester was the seventh of his line to assume the role since then, and his family had around two centuries of history here in the duchy.

Once morning studies were over, Wilfried and I ate lunch together. Harspiel practice then followed in the afternoon, after which Wilfried returned to his studies and I started needlework. I was being made to do lacework and embroidery, likely to pave the way for my eventual marriage.

"Rihyarda, might I avoid learning to sew and knit by simply deciding not to get married?"

"Milady! What has gotten into you?! You must get married. There is no question about it!"

"...I suppose so."

I was mostly just complaining out of boredom, but Rihyarda really blew up at the idea. After a few days, I gave in and just did my best with the lace and embroidery.

If only I was as skilled as Mom and Tuuli...

Fifth bell marked the start of our free time. Wilfried often took this opportunity to see his younger siblings in the main building of the castle, something he had gotten permission to do from his parents before they left. He had previously invited me to join him, but according to Rihyarda, that authorization wouldn't extend to me, since we weren't siblings of the same mother.

"I must go to the book room, but you may read one of my picture books to them in my place, Wilfried. Do your best to raise them into book-loving children," I would say to him before speeding to the book room. There, I spent my time blissfully surrounded by books. But it was never long enough, always seeming to go by in an instant.

Come sixth bell, Rihyarda would tear me away from whatever book I was reading to eat dinner, after which Wilfried and I would go to perform Mana Replenishment. The reasoning for us doing this so late was that we

needed to wait until the scholars had left the archduke's office. Bonifatius was there waiting for us, and while he did provide Wilfried with support, we were the only ones who did the actual replenishing. The acting archduke needed to preserve their mana, and thus it was best for him to leave the process to us.

Once the Mana Replenishment was over, I would take a bath and read until Rihyarda barked at me to put my book down and go to sleep. Thus concluded a peaceful day in the castle.

Earthdays were my days off, meaning I wouldn't have to study, train, or do anything else. I could simply do whatever I wanted, which was a big change of pace from the temple, where every day was the same old routine.

That didn't mean I could spend all day reading books, though; Angelica came home from her supplementary lessons on Earthdays, so we would borrow a room in the main building and hold a study group.

"Angelica, how are your lessons going?"

"I've passed eighty percent of my classes. Just a little more to go," she replied, her bright smile suggesting she had a little more confidence in herself now. She was working hard each and every day, and it was showing in her results. "Thanks to you, Lady Rozemyne, I think I might actually graduate now."

Unbelievably enough, Angelica had been so bad at her classes that she was approaching them with the assumption she wouldn't graduate at all. It seemed that my guard knight was in an even more dangerous spot than I expected.

Damuel and Cornelius would tell Angelica what she needed to learn next, then break the lessons down and explain them in a manner that was easy to understand.

"You certainly are a good teacher, Damuel."

"Written lessons are my one strong point. Not to mention we have a lot of resources here," he replied, pointing to the stack of documents that Cornelius had brought with him. They were all resources for Royal Academy lectures that Eckhart was kindly lending us; he had been passing through the knight dorms one day while Damuel was using gewinnen to teach Cornelius and offered to let them use his study materials from his student days. Now we no longer needed to rely on Damuel's memory and some simple notes written on boards.

“If only I were wealthy enough to preserve this much,” Damuel said with a sigh. It seemed parchment was so expensive that he hadn’t been able to buy any for recording notes; he would always write down the most important information on boards, shaving them down after tests so that they could be reused. The end result was him not having much in the way of study materials left over from his student days.

“Keep up the excellent work, Angelica.”

“Right! I’m going to get your mana for sure, Lady Rozemyne.”

After many comfortable days, I received an ordonnanz from Elvira; she had contacted the Gilberta Company and settled on a date for the temporary sewing to be done. It was then that we would hold a tea party in my name, gather the women of her faction, and debut the new style of dress. Given that Florencia was absent, I, the archduke’s adopted daughter, had to be the one to host it in the castle.

I prepared for the tea party while consulting Rihyarda and Elvira, but I couldn’t help but feel that my reading time was diminishing by the day. With slumped shoulders, I wrote out the letters of invitation, checked that we had everything we needed, planned out which sweets would be provided with Ella and Hugo, and honed the skills that a fine young noblewoman such as myself needed to exhibit when hosting a tea party.

Do I care about any of this? No. I just want books, please.

But sacrificing my reading time ultimately bore fruit, and when the day to hold the tea-party-slash-dress-debut came, we were ready. The changing area would be right beside the tea party room, the windows of which afforded a sweeping view of a spring garden.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Gilberta Company have arrived.”

“You may let them in.”

Brigitte, Elvira, and I lined up to welcome the Gilberta Company, with Rihyarda and our attendants standing behind us. Benno entered first, followed by Otto and Corinna, then finally the seamstresses. They all knelt before us.

“Lady Rozemyne. Lady Elvira. We are honored beyond words to have been invited to the castle to serve you on this fine day,” Benno began, greeting us on behalf of his group. Once he was done, he turned to Otto and said, “Allow me to introduce my store’s successor.”

Otto stood up from behind Benno, stepped forward, and then kneeled

again. His movements resembled Fran's so closely that I could immediately tell just how strictly he had been trained in the temple during my absence.

"Lady Rozemyne. Lady Elvira. Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting. It is an honor to meet you both. I am Otto, future head of the Gilberta Company. May our dealings be long and fortuitous."

...Oh, right. This is my first time meeting him as Rozemyne.

"I shall give you a true blessing from the heart," I said, pouring some mana into my ring. "May the Gilberta Company be blessed by Flutrane the Goddess of Water."

A soft green light spread through the room. Otto blinked at me in surprise, either due to not having expected a noble's blessing or not believing I could actually give them.

I informed Benno and Corinna of our plans for the day. First, the tea party would begin, with Brigitte wearing her dress from last year and standing beside me as I greeted our guests. I would then announce that I was making a new outfit, at which point the two of us would head to the changing room. There, Brigitte would change into the new dress and have the temporary sewing done before returning to the tea party. This would really make the difference in styles more apparent.

"So, are we going to be waiting in the changing room, then?" Corinna asked.

"Indeed. Please be ready to change Brigitte's clothes as soon as she arrives," I replied. "Benno and Otto, you shall join the tea party during her temporary absence. You may sell your goods while she is getting changed."

Benno and Otto had brought boxes containing hair pins and bottles of rinsham, which I didn't mind them selling while Brigitte was changing into her new dress.

"This might also be a good time to inform everyone that the Plantin Company is being established as an offshoot of the Gilberta Company."

"I agree. Thank you."

The noblewomen had gathered at the tea party, and I could see that several female knights with deep connections to Elvira's faction were there as well. I lined up with Elvira and Brigitte to welcome them.

"Thank you all for coming here today," I began, giving a noble greeting and recommending the sweets we had prepared. I then took a deliberate sip

of my tea; at such gatherings, nobody could drink before the host had done so.

Ella's sweets proved very popular, and I soon learned that many people had been eagerly awaiting today's tea party. If you asked me, I was doing a good job creating trends as the archduke's daughter.

"Lady Rozemyne, your chef truly is excellent," one noble lady said. "They always make sweets that I have never seen nor eaten before."

"Oh my, but I do believe I have tasted this particular kind before during one of Lady Elvira's tea parties," another added.

"I give my mother special early access to my recipes," I replied.

So began my peaceful tea party, complete with refined laughter and elegant tea-sipping.

"This is pound cake, is it not?" another noblewoman asked. "I quite adore pound cake."

"When I still lived in the temple, I received much assistance from Gustav of the Othmar Company and his granddaughter, Freida. As thanks for their help, I rewarded them with my pound cake recipe. Gustav's chef is very skilled and has invented many new flavors; I very much look forward to eating her pound cakes when the opportunity presents itself."

"Oh my! What a fascinating history."

I traveled along the tables, dividing my time between our guests as equally as I could. Once that was done, it was time for the main event.

"There is an outfit that I would like to show all of you today," I said, calling Brigitte over to stand beside me. I explained how the current trends didn't suit women like her, and that I would consequently be creating a new fashion of dress. "Today, a new outfit of such a fashion will be adjusted to fit her. I would also like for all of you to consider what else might be done to make Brigitte look even more attractive."

With that, I took Brigitte with me to the changing room next door, and after making sure the seamstresses were all ready to get her changed, I nodded. "Corinna, I leave the rest to you. Ottilie, come and inform me when Brigitte is ready. Shall we go, Benno? Otto?"

"As you wish."

And so, I exited the changing room with Benno and Otto, both of whom were carrying boxes filled with products. When we returned to the tea party, I informed our guests that the Gilberta Company had originally dealt

exclusively with clothing and apparel, going on to announce that they intended to return to these roots by establishing the Plantin Company, which would be handling their learning materials and books from here on out.

The noblewomen watched on with interest.

“I gave them the name ‘Plantin’ myself, so that they might continue to sell my books and learning materials,” I concluded, shifting the topic to studying.

Hearing this, the ladies got quite actively involved. It seemed that their younger children had quickly learned their letters and math through Rozemyne-brand learning materials, inspiring heated competition with their older brothers and sisters.

“They learned to read so quickly with those karuta that their teacher could hardly believe it,” one lady said.

“Oh my, the same happened with yours? I suppose there truly is something special about Lady Rozemyne’s materials.”

“The children had so much fun competing in the winter playroom that they all left motivated to win next year,” I said with a polite smile, circling the tables as Plantin and Gilberta goods were sold. “I am making yet more new picture books, and it would please me greatly if you were to buy them around the Starbind Ceremony or during the next winter socializing.”

It was at this point that Elvira chimed in. “Oh yes, that reminds me—Cornelius has been ever so invested in his studies lately. In the past, he said that he only wished to learn the bare minimum expected of an archnoble, but now he is fervently reading books on tactics and collecting study notes. He plays gewinnen with Karstedt and asks Eckhart all about what he learned in the Royal Academy. What has inspired this fervor, I wonder? Is it thanks to your materials?” she asked, glancing my way.

“Competition inspires one to try their hardest so that they can beat their opponents. From what I saw in the playroom, this is especially true for men,” I said, once again putting on my courteous smile as I provided the most surface-level explanation possible.

I couldn’t exactly say that all of my guard knights were gathering together as part of the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron to hold their own study groups and such. Nor could I divulge that Damuel had in fact been unloading a lot of work onto Cornelius, since he didn’t have the time to

prepare for Angelica's return on Earthdays when following me to the temple. And of course, revealing that Cornelius was working so hard because I had promised to give him one original recipe from an unpublished list if we got Angelica to pass her classes before summer was completely out of the question. All I could do was smile and deflect.

"Oh my, and this is a hair ornament just like Lady Rozemyne's."

"Indeed. I order all of my hair sticks from the Gilberta Company. These flower ornaments do not just serve as hairpins—they can decorate clothes as well. Would anyone like to order some?" I asked, leaving Benno and Otto to take care of the rest while I speedily returned to the changing room.

"Corinna, do we have any spare hair sticks?" I asked as she was making the final adjustments to the back of Brigitte's dress. It appeared that they were almost done.

"We certainly do, but why do you need them?"

"I would like for you to remove the flower parts and use them to adorn the dress, such as on the cloth-heavy parts around the waist. Just like this..."

I took two hair sticks and demonstrated by pressing them against Brigitte's dress. Corinna blinked several times, then nodded.

"I will begin right away."

"By the way, Corinna—my apologies for rushing you despite saying that you would have plenty of time to spend on this. Mother's letter must have come as a shock."

Corinna shook her head with a smile. "I was already prepared, since Benno warned me that this was exactly what would happen. Otto was the one who really struggled here, what with having to pass Fran's lessons before today."

It seemed that Benno had been fully aware that informing Elvira of the new dress I was making would result in the schedule being moved forward. Once again, I had to gape in awe at how good he was at predicting the future.

"Oh, and here you are, Lady Rozemyne. Benno wanted me to give you this," Corinna said, handing me a letter which I briskly skimmed. It contained a lot of lengthy noble euphemisms, but the overall message was clear: *"You gotta lay the groundwork before introducing new things, you absolute idiot."* He had mentioned this back when I was going to be an apprentice merchant, and now he was having to teach me the same lesson

once again.

Eep. Sorry. Thank you for saving my bacon once again.

By the time I was done reading the letter, Corinna had finished removing the flowers from the hair sticks and sewing them onto the dress. She examined the newly decorated waist, nodded, then called me over.

“Lady Rozemyne, how is this?”

“It’s wonderful. Corinna, everyone—I thank you ever so much. You have done well today. Ottilie, is the tea ready?”

Leaving Corinna’s squad to relax, I returned to the tea party with Brigitte.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone. This is the new dress that I designed for Brigitte. Does she not give off an entirely different air from before?”

“My my *my*. It is like she has been reborn, Lady Rozemyne. She looks much more feminine than she did in the previous dress,” Elvira said with surprise, initiating a wave of praise as the other noblewomen began to comment on how much better Brigitte looked.

The current fashion made her appear ungainly, but this new dress hugged her curves down to the waist and gave her a much more feminine appearance. Really, though, it all came down to highlighting her sizable chest and toned, well-trained body.

“Brigitte is tall with a lean figure, so I had the upper half cling to her tightly while using an excess of cloth on the lower half,” I explained. “The cloth used is lightweight, and I deliberately kept the shoulders exposed so that it would be easier for her to move as a knight, if necessary.”

The idea seemed to be even more of a hit with the female knights in the audience, given how they were leaning slightly forward in excitement as they looked over Brigitte.

“...Perhaps the sleeves would look better if moved upward a little?” one lady suggested.

“It might also be wise to tighten up the underarm area,” another observed.

We received recommendations to start the sleeves at the forearms rather than right above the elbows, and to adjust the dress around the armpits to fully hide the feystone bodysuit beneath. Overall, however, Brigitte’s new outfit was a massive success, with nobody completely rejecting the design.

Brigitte and I walked between the tables to hear everyone's thoughts and potentially incorporate their ideas during the temporary sewing stage.

"The dress looks wonderful on you, Brigitte. Do you think they could prepare something similar for me next year?" one female knight asked, giving the dress a serious look over.

This was most likely one of Brigitte's coworkers, seeming to be a little older than her. Her build was similar, and she had apparently been having a bad time with the current popular fashion trend, since it didn't suit her at all.

"But perhaps it would be best not to decorate the upper half so much?" she continued, musing aloud. "Once they see your unadorned chest, Brigitte, I'm certain that men will flock to offer you all the feystones they own. Ahahaha."

"I'd rather you not tease me here," Brigitte shot back, pursing her lips. It was rare to see her acting like this.

As I watched on, the female knight noticed my gaze and stiffened up a bit. "Lady Rozemyne, thank you ever so much for designing this wondrous fashion. I am certain that a man will fall for Brigitte now."

"One already has. Though she did not even consider reciprocating his affections," I replied, thinking of Damuel.

"Oh, my my my. Is that so?" the female knight asked, her lips curling into an amused grin.

"Shall we move on, Lady Rozemyne?"

We proceeded to the next table at Brigitte's urgent prompting, where one of the younger girls let out a refined squeal upon seeing the flowers decorating the dress. "To think that the flowers from your hair ornaments could be used to adorn dresses as well... This is simply wonderful."

Up until now, it was normal for outfits to be decorated with embroidery, with actual flowers being used for any physical embellishments. It took a fair amount of mana to sustain the beauty of a living flower, however, meaning it was difficult for laynobles to adorn their dresses with too many. And given the current mana shortage, even archnobles struggled somewhat to justify wearing them.

"Would you accept orders for just the flowers?" the girl asked.

"But of course. Benno, Otto—this fine lady wishes to use the flowers of the hair ornaments for her dresses. I trust you to work out the details."

Benno immediately strode over at my request, wearing a peaceful smile

on his face.

Another young noblewoman beside us let out an envious sigh. “Aaah... Now I yearn for a new dress as well. Lady Rozemyne, might I ask you to introduce me to the Gilberta Company, too?”

“...I can introduce you, but I believe you would be better suited to dresses of the current fashion,” I replied. “I thought up this particular design to suit women who were excluded by current trends, and since those already complement you just fine, I cannot guarantee that this new style will as well.”

The girl was short with a slender, dainty figure; a dress like this would honestly just make it seem as though she lacked any assets at all, especially given her very, very modest chest.

“We all appear more attractive when we emphasize our strengths and mask our faults,” I continued. “It is for this reason that certain builds and bodies are better suited to certain fashions. Just because a particular style is the newest, it does not necessarily make it the best. You should instead focus on what suits you most.”

“...Would you think of a dress that suits me as well, Lady Rozemyne?” a slightly chubby girl asked, placing a hand on her stomach.

“It would be best for you to discuss this with a seamstress, but as a starting point, I would suggest a dress with a wide-open neckline to make the area around your collarbone look prettier, while using distinct colors and materials for the torso and skirt of your dress. A tight, darker-colored torso paired with a fluffy, lighter-colored skirt should create contrast that makes your stomach area appear leaner.”

“Thank you ever so much. I shall discuss this with my personal seamstress.”

We had many other discussions, but in the end, I was mostly just emphasizing that they shouldn’t wear the fashion I was introducing purely because it was new. There wasn’t much a person could do if a particular style didn’t suit them, and I strongly believed that the clothes they wore while looking for a marriage partner at the Starbind Ceremony should be the ones that made them look the prettiest, not whatever was the most popular at the time.

I returned to the changing room with Brigitte, where we listed the concerns expressed to us by the other noblewomen and suggested

adjustments for the finished dress. Its debut and our attempt to secure public approval of the new fashion had gone off without a hitch.

As the end of spring approached, I learned through an emotional and gratitude-filled letter from Angelica's parents that she had returned from the Royal Academy and would be rejoining my guard knights starting tomorrow.

"That's great. It was all worth it," I said with a relieved sigh.

When I told my guard knights that Angelica had passed her supplementary lessons, Damuel and Cornelius fist-pumped the air, shaking out of sheer emotion. They had pushed themselves to the limit to teach her, and she was perhaps the slowest learner any of us knew, so they both felt like teachers witnessing their own student graduate.

I was already in the process of making Brigitte's dress, so I decided to go ahead and reward the two of them for their efforts. As promised, I gave Damuel a small gold coin in payment.

"I thank you deeply, Lady Rozemyne. Now I can repay my brother for the money he lent me," he said, rejoicing as he clenched the coin in his hand.

A cold sweat ran down my back. *That debt is from when he had to partly pay for my ceremonial robes, right? I ended up barely wearing them at all, since I became the High Bishop almost right after they were made. I was even thinking about having them altered into another outfit, just so the cloth doesn't go to waste. So, um... should I give Damuel some other reward, too? It'd be sad for him to have worked this hard just to pay off a debt.*

But despite thinking over potential ideas, nothing in particular sprang to mind. I decided that I'd give him whatever gift seemed appropriate at a later date, then moved on to giving Cornelius the paper with a recipe on it.

"Here you are, Cornelius. This is a recipe for (Mont Blanc), which is made with the cream of a tanieh." He liked the chestnut-esque taniehs that grew in the autumn, so I guessed that he would love to know how to make chestnut cream.

"The cream of a tanieh? Wouldn't that taste good inside of a crepe, too?"

"Oh, certainly. A crepe would taste doubly good with both whipped and tanieh cream inside," I replied with a nod.

Cornelius's grin widened and he gripped the recipe firmly, determined to

take it to the family estate's head chef as soon as possible. But despite the anticipation shining in his eyes, spring had only just ended.

"Oh, you can't make it right away," I said. "Taniehs grow in the autumn, remember?"

"I can't wait that long. I need a solution, Rozemyne!" Cornelius demanded. But I had no answer for him; nothing could be done about taniehs being out of season. "This is just awful. We all worked hard, but I'm the only one not getting anything for it!" he exclaimed, glaring at me with tearful eyes.

I scoured my mind for an answer. "W-Well, um... You might not be able to make (Mont Blanc) with tanieh cream right now, but why not try making it with other kinds? I'm sure there are some spring creams you would like."

"There! That's it!"

Cornelius fist-pumped again, this time even more enthusiastically. He would get the recipe to the head chef tonight and have him make some as soon as possible.

"Tomorrow, I believe I shall also reward Angelica by giving her that mana," I said aloud.

Brigitte nodded, smiling as she watched Cornelius's and Damuel's celebrations. "I, too, am excited to see how her manablade will evolve."

Angelica’s Manablade

After breakfast, I started heading from my room to the knights’ training grounds, where I would work on my stamina as part of my daily routine. Since moving here, I had been opting to walk instead of riding Lessy, but this meant Wilfried was blasting ahead and leaving me behind.

Damuel was the only one accompanying me there today, since the schedule was such that my other guard knights—that is, Brigitte and Cornelius—were to arrive ahead of me to begin their own training.

“I truly do envy your mana capacity...” Damuel murmured as we trod along slowly.

I looked up at him, wondering whether this was his lovesickness seeping through. “I think it largely comes down to training. Ferdinand told me that I have this much mana because I compressed it a ridiculous amount, desperate to survive by any means necessary.”

At that, I cautiously scanned our surroundings to make sure nobody else was nearby. When I had confirmed that we were alone, I gestured for Damuel to crouch down, lowering my voice and continuing once we were at eye level with each other.

“Before entering the temple, I survived without the magic tools given to noble children. I was constantly on the verge of death due to the mana overflowing from my body.”

“Ah...”

“And so, I repeatedly compressed my mana out of pure instinct to survive, not even realizing what I was doing. That is why my mana capacity became so great,” I said, deciding to say no more on that particular subject and resume walking.

Damuel stood up and followed.

“I believe your mana capacity is still growing—am I right?” I asked. “If you are jealous of mine, Damuel, then I suggest you remove all of your magic tools and instead compress your mana while skirting death.”

“...I apologize for speaking so thoughtlessly,” Damuel conceded. He

must have remembered that he knew me from my commoner days, and that, unlike normal noble kids, I obviously wouldn't have grown up with magic tools available at all times; his expression weakened, and he apologized with his brow furrowed miserably.

"Guh..." I wheezed. "Finally here."

"Shall we go to the break room?"

Walking from my room to the grounds was already plenty of exercise for me, so I gave myself some time to rest. Once I had collected my breath, I would do a few stretches, and that would be the end of my training for the day.

...If only.

As much as I wanted that to be true, the harsh reality was that I would be training until it was time to return to my room. I thought I would at least call Eckhart over so I could start my stretches, but when I asked a knight to fetch him for me, his expression clouded over.

"Eckhart is presently away on other business. My sincerest apologies, but may I ask you to wait until he returns?"

"Certainly. I thank you ever so much for informing me."

I couldn't train without Eckhart there to watch over me, which in turn meant that Damuel had to continue guarding me rather than moving on to training himself.

"Without Eckhart, I suppose I won't even be allowed to walk around the grounds," I mused aloud.

"Correct."

All sorts of projectiles were launched into the air when the knights trained with magic, and there was no guarantee that Damuel would be able to block them all. For that reason, it was much too dangerous for me to wander about during Eckhart's absence.

Noticing that Damuel was still uncomfortable from our conversation before, I started to ponder. He was a laynoble, and I knew that he was torn up over his lack of mana. I was also aware that his small mana capacity was the reason that Brigitte refused to even consider being with him. But I had already given him a blessing; there was nothing else I could do. His only way forward was to work hard on his own.

"So, Damuel—I heard that kids are taught to control their mana upon

entering the Royal Academy, including through mana compression. But my methods may differ from noble ones, in the same way that I learned the names of the gods differently from everyone else."

When it came to controlling mana, the most important thing was having a clear mental image to focus on. By teaching Damuel what I had pictured myself, perhaps I could help him out a little.

I looked around the break room, spotting some leather bags and a wooden box.

"Damuel, would you mind opening that box and stuffing your cape into it?"

"Er... Okay?"

Confused, Damuel removed his cape, balled it up, and went about packing it into the box. His stuffing attempt was poor, with some material still visibly sticking out.

"Consider the box to be your body and the cape your mana. At the moment, your mana is entirely uncompressed. What would you do if you wanted to compress it and thus increase the amount of space inside of you?"

Damuel silently folded his cape and placed it back in the box; there was now a bit more space than there had been when it was messily balled up.

"Good. When picturing mana compression, imagine repeatedly folding capes to increase how many you can fit inside the body. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. I never considered it visually like this, but the analogy is very easy to understand."

"Well, it might please you to know that I took inspiration from your own teaching methods, where you used gewinnen pieces to demonstrate tactics."

Damuel clapped his hands together in realization. One's mental image was crucial when it came to controlling mana, so I had concluded that giving a visual demonstration would be easier to understand than explaining verbally.

"Now, in a similar fashion, try folding your mana and compressing it inside of yourself."

"Understood."

With that, Damuel shut his eyes, drawing his brows together in concentration as he started moving his mana. I waited silently for a moment when an inspired look washed over his face and his eyes opened again,

brimming with fascination.

“I did it, Lady Rozemyne. I was able to compress my mana far more than I ever have before.”

“I see. Excellent. I do not know how long it will take for your mana to grow, but I imagine there are few opportunities for you to use it while guarding me in the temple. I suggest allowing it to build up and compressing it as much as you can, which should ultimately improve your capacity,” I suggested.

Ferdinand had told me that getting used to containing a large quantity of mana would improve how much a particular vessel could accommodate.

“Now then, Damuel—would you fetch me one of those leather bags? And lend me your cape.”

“Hrm? Very well.”

“I also wish to demonstrate the method I personally use to compress my mana, which goes something like this,” I said, taking both items from him. I folded the cape and placed it inside the bag in a similar fashion to what I had already shown him, then sat on the bag to force out the air, completely flattening it. The result was the cape taking up even less space than it had while just folded.

Upon seeing this, Damuel’s jaw dropped.

“You are also welcome to use that as inspiration, if you wish,” I said, taking out the compressed cape that was now covered in deep creases.

As Damuel cradled his head, desperately trying to smooth out the wrinkles, a small bell rang from behind the door.

“You may enter.”

In came Angelica, her light-blue hair swaying behind her head in a securely contained ponytail. “I am back, Lady Rozemyne. Starting today, I will resume service as your guard knight. Thank you for all your help.”

“Welcome home, Angelica. You’ve finished all your lessons, I’ve heard. Your hard work has been rewarded.”

Angelica had needed to give greetings and deliver reports all over the place before finally being able to come to the training grounds. Brigitte and Cornelius had come as well, intending to switch with her and Damuel to give them a chance to train.

“As I am unable to leave this room until Eckhart comes for me, Angelica, I was thinking that I could use this opportunity to pour my mana

into your manablade. Or would you rather we begin another time?”

“Let’s do it now, please,” Angelica responded at once.

Everyone else agreed that they wanted to see how the manablade would change when my mana was poured into it. They were particularly curious, since it was apparently rare for someone to actually give their mana to another’s manablade.

“I admittedly know nothing about manablades, so would you be so kind as to teach me?” I asked. “I also wish to see what your manablade looks like.”

“Here it is,” Angelica said, drawing the sword from her hip. The sheath it had been stored in was of a similar size to that of a dagger, but the manablade when pulled out ended up being about fifty centimeters in length.

“That’s certainly longer than I expected,” I said, blinking in surprise.

Angelica nodded happily. “The blade grows based on how much mana you put into it. It started off even shorter than a knife,” she said, going on to explain that it had gotten this big over several years of gradual effort. “Longer blades are better for fighting feybeasts, so I want it to grow as fast as possible. I also want it to get aptitudes that I don’t have.”

“What are aptitudes?” I asked, tilting my head in confusion at the new term. Brigitte was the one to answer, since she knew that having Angelica try would take twice as long.

“She is referring to mana aptitudes, which are elemental affinities that you are born with. It is easier to get divine protection from the primary gods depending on which ones you have.”

“Can you not receive their divine protection without them?”

“You can, but it is difficult to catch the attention of the gods and earn their divine protection without having something to aid the process,” Brigitte continued. It turned out that, while having the right aptitudes made it easier to get divine protection, it was also possible to receive it without them. Angelica wanted to get the mana of others so that her manablade would obtain their aptitudes, and thus secure her the divine protection of various gods.

“What are your aptitudes, Angelica?” I asked.

“I have aptitudes for Fire and Wind. Though in the end, I couldn’t get Schutzaria’s divine protection.”

“Hm? It’s possible to not receive a god’s divine protection despite having the aptitude for them?”

Brigitte frowned uncomfortably. “That could possibly happen in... rare instances, perhaps,” she said. I could guess from her tone that having the right aptitude normally guaranteed divine protection.

I asked everyone else what their aptitudes were, thereby learning that Brigitte had aptitudes for Fire and Earth, while Damuel had an aptitude for Wind. Cornelius said that he had aptitudes for Light, Water, Fire, and Wind, which took me by surprise at first, but he promptly explained that this was normal for an archnoble close to the archducal family; archnobles always had more plentiful mana and a broader range of aptitudes.

“What are your aptitudes, Lady Rozemyne?” Brigitte asked in return. All I could do was shake my head, though. It seemed like she expected me to know, but I certainly didn’t.

“I haven’t a clue. Where might I find out?”

“Did Lord Ferdinand not tell you when your mana was registered for your baptism?” Cornelius asked.

“The registration medal should have changed to the divine colors of the gods you have aptitudes for,” Damuel added. “What colors did you see?”

Their barrage of questions left me faltering as I tried to remember. I seemed to recall it turning seven different colors, at which point Ferdinand said, “As expected.” But he hadn’t bothered explaining mana aptitudes or anything like that.

And then, the realization hit me.

Would it really be okay for me, the daughter of a third wife, to say that my medal was seven colors when my older brother Cornelius’s only had four? I wasn’t sure whether that was something I should publicize; perhaps Ferdinand had intentionally refrained from explaining what it meant to help ensure it was kept a secret.

“Um... I do remember there being several different colors, but as I didn’t understand their significance at the time, I can’t recall exactly which ones I saw. Ferdinand put the medal straight into the box, so...”

Damuel raised a thoughtful eyebrow. “Given that you can grant blessings from Angriff with ease, you surely have an aptitude for Fire.”

“And you can use Schutzaria’s shield, so you must have an aptitude for Wind as well,” Brigitte added.

What other spells had I used in front of other people? I searched my memory.

“...I performed a restoration of the earth after the trombe ceremony, if that means anything.”

“You used Flutrane’s staff from the temple for that, and the divine instruments themselves have their own elemental infusions with no relation to the aptitudes of their users. If one needed particular aptitudes to use them, would the priests and shrine maidens not struggle to perform divine rituals?”

“You have a point.”

It would cause a lot of problems if the temple wasn’t able to perform Spring Prayer or heal trombe-damaged earth due to lacking a priest with an aptitude for Water. The fact that you could infuse elements into the magic tools themselves surprised me, and as I was nodding to myself, Brigitte cocked her head to one side in thought.

“The spring’s mana reacted so well to your song on the Night of Flutrane, Lady Rozemyne, that I was certain you had an aptitude for Water as well.”

“Water, Fire, and Wind, huh? She sure shares a lot with Cornelius,” Angelica observed, at which point Damuel nodded with a smile.

“No doubt due to them being siblings; one’s aptitudes are always heavily influenced by their parents.”

“Oh, interesting... So, what impact does mana aptitude have on manablades?” I asked.

Angelica answered this question, gently stroking the hilt of her sword all the while. “Feybeasts have aptitudes as well, and it can be easier or harder to beat them depending on what elements your manablade has. That’s why I want to get as many elements for it as I can.”

Since she herself only possessed two aptitudes, she was increasing her manablade’s Earth infusion by feeding it feystones from defeated feybeasts. But this process was extremely slow going.

As I nodded again, processing all the information I had just been fed, my guard knights started discussing how my mana should be used to grow the manablade. As one might expect given their profession, this was a subject they were all very interested in.

“Shouldn’t we focus on padding out the elements that Angelica doesn’t

have, since that's what she wants?" Brigitte asked.

"I think we should instead use the mana to extend the blade, as this has the greatest impact on the amount of damage done," Damuel proposed in response. "She can worry about elements once the manablade is at a proper length. Isn't it most important to reach a state where it's effective in battle?"

"You would be right if this were anyone else's manablade, Damuel, but Angelica shows no motivation to fix her own weak points. We must use this opportunity to do that for her," Brigitte interjected.

"This is like her grades all over again—she needs the assistance of others to cover for her flaws, rather than bolster her strengths," Cornelius agreed.

I looked at the sword while listening to their conversation. "What do you want to do, Angelica?"

"Brigitte's right—I'm not good at compensating for my weak points, so I want them fixed up."

"So I should think about strengthening those weaknesses while I pour my mana into the blade?"

"Uh huh!"

As everyone advised me to fill the manablade with the elements Angelica lacked, I touched the feystone embedded in its hilt. My guard knights stressed how crucial it was that I did not exceed the total amount of mana Angelica had added herself, so I started by pouring in small amounts.

...If you ask me, all this element business is pretty secondary—what Angelica really lacks is brainpower. Her mind is pretty much already built for high-speed battles, so if we want to address her weak points, our best option would be to give the sword intelligence. And you know what? This is a fantasy world overflowing with unbelievable things, so surely that's possible. Let's just operate under the assumption that it is.

Okay... Let's make it intelligent enough that it can listen to and remember what people say, bark out corrections whenever Angelica messes up, and give her advice since she's lacking in knowledge. Wait... That wouldn't even be a sword! It'd be another Ferdinand!

"What are you all doing crowded up over there?"

"Gyaaah?! Eckhart?!" I cried, literally jumping in place as my thoughts were suddenly interrupted. "Well, uh... Angelica brought her manablade for me to pour mana into, so—"

“Absolutely not,” Eckhart shot back, shutting me down mid-sentence. “Growing a manablade is no simple matter. Give it mana only when Ferdinand is here and observing the process.”

I glanced at the sword, having already poured mana into it.

Oh no. There’s no future where I don’t get yelled at now.

“Eckhart, dear brother, this is rather difficult for me to say, but... I have already given it my mana.”

He flinched, then instantly sprang into action, whipping out his schtappe in one hand and a yellow feystone in the other, striking the latter while shouting “*Ordonnanz*!” When the ivory bird appeared, he faced it and clearly spoke Ferdinand’s name, reporting that I had poured my mana into someone else’s manablade before swiping his schtappe through the air to send the ordonnanz flying off. Unease built up inside of me as I watched it zoom away in a straight line.

“Is it really that bad, Eckhart?”

“The quality and quantity of your mana is on an entirely different level from that of a mednoble. It is impossible to say how the manablade might evolve.”

“Wha?!” Angelica cried, anxiously reaching to grab her sword.

“Don’t touch it, Angelica!” Eckhart shouted with a sharp glare, causing her to gasp, retract her hand, and then clench it against her chest. “We must keep our distance until Lord Ferdinand arrives to investigate.”

The ordonnanz returned in the blink of an eye, then promptly delivered Ferdinand’s response: a brisk, “I will be there,” in a palpably angry voice. There was no avoiding the fact that, wherever he was right now, he was absolutely ticked off.

He’s going to lecture me so hard. I’m genuinely terrified.

Eckhart sighed, the tension draining from his expression a little now that he knew Ferdinand was on the way. He then immediately glared at Cornelius. “Why did you not stop this?”

“I learned in the Royal Academy that mana exchanges are okay so long as both parties involved agree with it, so I assumed that, as long as Rozemyne was happy to participate, there wouldn’t be an issue,” Cornelius explained. The other guard knights nodded in turn; they all shared the same perspective on the matter, so nobody had even considered trying to stop us.

But Eckhart shook his head. “Remember that Rozemyne has yet to enter

the Royal Academy—in other words, she knows nothing of mana. She may be used to the process of pouring mana due to her involvement in rituals, but she has no grasp on the techniques necessary to control the quantity being moved, nor does she know how to select a particular element of mana to use."

"...Ah."

"Under normal circumstances, children do not use mana prior to entering the Royal Academy, aside from during greetings. Rozemyne has performed rituals in the temple and blessed the Knight's Order, so it is easy to forget this, but she has not been formally educated on these matters and thus has no understanding of mana control. You must not think of her as a student."

As all of my guard knights faltered, looking around with dazed expressions as though they had indeed forgotten that I wasn't a learned student of the Royal Academy, Ferdinand flew in on his highbeast. He landed on the training grounds before jumping down from his highbeast and turning it back into a feystone. His gaze then fixed on us, and he immediately began striding this way. Given that he had come to the castle in his priest robes, he must have been pretty peeved.

"Rozemyne, I believe I instructed you to do nothing reckless. Am I mistaken?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"First, show me the manablade in question."

At that, Ferdinand picked up Angelica's sword and gave it a firm look over, pouring in a little bit of mana himself to determine what influence my own was having on it.

"It seems nothing has happened yet," he concluded. "It becomes more difficult for one to control their manablade when it contains too much mana from another person, and you have an absurd capacity for mana to begin with, Rozemyne. It would be unthinkable for you to have the precise control necessary for an operation such as this. What would you have done if ownership was transferred from Angelica to you?"

"U-Um... In that case, I... I'd just tell the manablade to obey Angelica! It'd listen to me, since I'd be its master, right?"

Angelica's face lit up. "You're so smart, Lady Rozemyne! That way, even I could use a strong manablade."

“You’re all fools!” Ferdinand exclaimed, clearly exasperated. He set the manablade back down onto the table, then began lecturing not just Angelica and me, but all the guard knights present.

The lecture went on for so long that I thought Ferdinand might run out of air—he talked about manablades, the meaning of putting your mana into feystones and magic tools so that only you could use them, the benefits of doing so, the flaws of doing so, and indeed everything one needed to know about two people exchanging mana.

“Rozemyne, do you now understand the dangers of what you attempted to do?”

“Yes.”

“And you, Angelica?”

“I certainly do, I think.”

Hold on, I recognize that look! All we grizzled veterans of the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron knew from experience that the face she was currently making was a surefire sign that she didn’t actually understand at all.

Ferdinand seemed to pick up on this as well. His eyebrow twitched, but when he unleashed his fury...

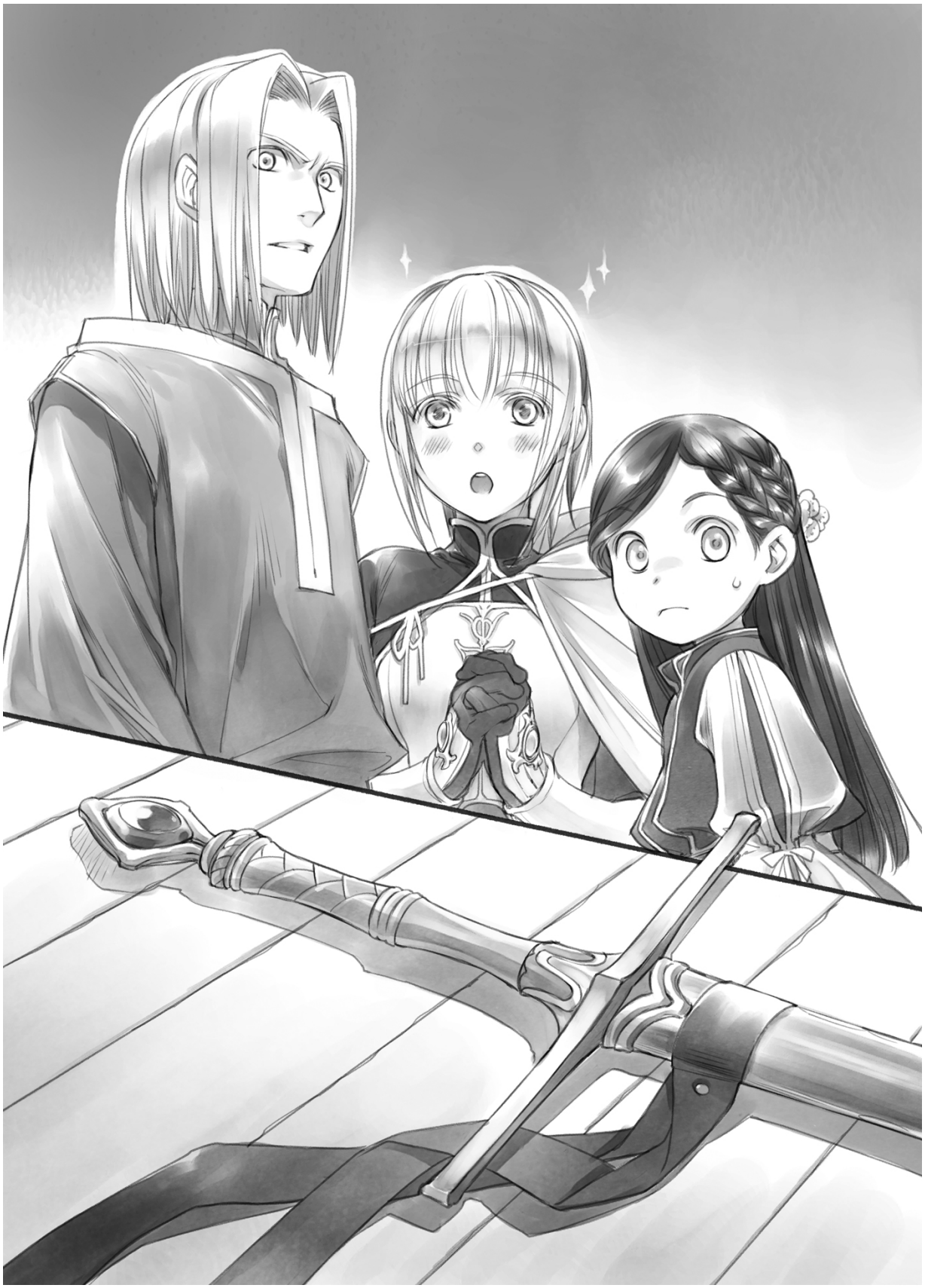
“Fool! Why were you not listening?!”

...a second voice cried out in unison—one that also sounded exactly like him.

“What...?”

Even Ferdinand was taken aback, and that was when Angelica’s manablade began to lecture her in that same, eerily familiar voice. “You do not understand at all, my master.”

Though, to be more precise, the voice was emanating from the feystone on the manablade’s hilt.



Ferdinand grimaced, looking down at the feystone in disgust, then turned his gaze to me. “Rozemyne, why would you ever...?”

“This is a false charge! I would *never* do something like this!”

“Ah, I see. Forgive me. A manablade lecturing its master was so bizarre that the only conclusion I could draw was that you were involved,” Ferdinand replied, rubbing his temples as the manablade gleamed in the light.

“And you are correct,” the manablade responded. “I was born from the mana and wishes of Lady Rozemyne, the master of my master.”

“Bwuh?!”

All eyes fell on me. I stared at the feystone, blinking rapidly, at which point it continued talking in Ferdinand’s voice.

“You wished for a sword with intelligence—one that listens to and remembers what people say, barks out corrections when its master does something incorrectly, and gives her advice since she’s lacking in knowledge. And you made this wish while clearly picturing Lord Ferdinand.”

“Now that you mention it... I did. While I was pouring my mana into the blade, I concluded that knowledge was what Angelica lacked the most, so, uh... I mean, I never thought *this* would happen,” I explained, desperately trying to plead my case.

Ferdinand glared at me. “I knew you were responsible. What was that about a false charge?”

“Lady Rozemyne’s wishes were not the only cause of my existence, however—it was also due to your mana coursing through me, Lord Ferdinand,” the manablade declared. It had apparently adopted Ferdinand’s voice and personality upon receiving his mana, meaning he was at least partly responsible for the creation of this artificial sword intelligence.

“See! You were the one who pushed it over the edge, Ferdinand!”

“That is clearly not my fault. You are the one to blame for this.”

“Ngh...”

It was true that I had thought about giving the sword intelligence, and I had poured mana into the blade without really considering the consequences. In the end, I had to take responsibility for my actions.

“I’m sorry, Angelica. I never considered that your weapon might evolve in such a negative way... If you don’t want to be lectured by this grumpy

sword, I will take full responsibility and accept it as my own burden to bear."

"It is quite the opposite, Lady Rozemyne—there is no better sword for me than one that will remember things on my behalf and tell me all sorts of useful information. I will treasure this manablade for the rest of my life. I was really happy when it called me its master," she replied, picking up the manablade from the table and stroking its feystone.

"Indeed. I will compensate for the knowledge my master lacks."

"In that case, I'll leave all the thinking to you," Angelica said happily. It seemed that they were already on good terms, but in a way, that was honestly kind of terrifying.

"...Angelica, are you sure about this? I am stricken with the feeling that this sword might never shut up," I said. With a Ferdinand only capable of speaking at my side all day and every day, I couldn't imagine ever being able to relax.

"Oh, is that so?" Ferdinand asked in a dark voice.

Eep. I sense that I've made a mistake of some kind.

Ferdinand pinched my cheek between his thumb and forefinger and started pulling it, looking down at Angelica all the while. "If you are content with that manablade, you may continue to use it. However, I hereby forbid Rozemyne from pouring in any more mana; I would not like for it to evolve in any other strange ways."

Everyone there agreed with big nods—that is, everyone except for Angelica, who instead hung her head in disappointment.

Let’s Print More Stuff

Several days had passed since the world was cursed with the birth of Angelica’s lecture blade, but it turned out to be quite the interesting little thing—while it acted and spoke like Ferdinand, it was completely lacking in knowledge. It was supposedly meant to absorb information through its surroundings and by having its master Angelica teach it things, but this meant she was stuck getting lectured by a sword that knew even less than she did.

“So it lectures you, but nothing much comes from it?” *That sounds terrible...* I muttered on the inside.

The manablade gleamed in response. “What my master must first do is imbue me with knowledge,” it declared in a haughty tone, resembling Ferdinand in attitude alone.

“Well then, Angelica, I suppose you’ll need to study in order to help your manablade accumulate knowledge,” I observed.

“Stenluke will actually remember things, unlike me, so the time spent teaching him will undoubtedly be worth it.”

“Stenluke?”

Angelica smiled. “That’s his name,” she said, stroking her manablade. Given its intelligence, she had apparently decided naming it was necessary.

Damuel, who had been looking down uncomfortably at the manablade as it spoke in Ferdinand’s voice, shifted his gaze to Angelica and crossed his arms. “In that case, I suppose you will want to go through a crash course on fourth-year lessons to prepare your weapon?” he asked, adding under his breath, “It should be much easier this time, since we won’t have to repeat ourselves over and over again for you to understand.”

Cornelius nodded in agreement. “Right. My brother had some notes on fourth-year lessons among the study materials he gave us.”

“Preparing in advance so that you aren’t knocked off your feet again would indeed be wise,” Brigitte added.

Angelica listened to everyone’s opinions while nodding solemnly, then

suddenly looked up with a glint in her blue eyes. She faced Damuel and held out the sword. “Damuel, I leave the rest to you. Good luck, Stenluke.”

“My master, you yourself must do the studying!” the manablade exclaimed. “I cannot hear the voices of others without mana flowing through me, and if all the lessons are to be taught to me, then your mana will certainly not last.”

It seemed that Angelica lacked the mana to keep the sword animated all day, which would be necessary if she wanted it to take lessons in her place. Her eyes widened like saucers as she gripped the manablade in shock. “So, I’ll... I’ll never be able to escape from studying?”

“Of course not, you fool!” the sword barked in a very familiar fashion. It was so similar to Ferdinand that I was honestly a little impressed. This was some manablade; hopefully it could keep up the good work and actually get its master to study.

“I suppose I should compose a study plan so that Angelica and Stenluke can learn together...” Damuel mused aloud.

“Thank you for your efforts,” I said.

While Damuel and Cornelius got to work writing up a plan for Angelica, I started digging into the pile of study materials myself. Sure, they were only lesson guides and classroom notes, but they were lines of text that I hadn’t read before. And since my very purpose in life was to read, I had to delve in at once.

I read through the fourth-year materials that Eckhart had given us, reminiscing about how blissful it had always been to start a new school year and be given a ton of unfamiliar textbooks. It looked like Eckhart had often asked Ferdinand for help while he was staying at the Royal Academy, judging by the comments and explanations written in his handwriting here and there amid the documents.

My brow knitted in thought. “So, Brigitte—do you think I could sell study resources to students using Ferdinand and Eckhart’s materials as a base?” I asked. Even in my Urano days, the notes of top students had been worth a lot of money; surely these resources would be especially valuable considering this world didn’t have textbooks quite like ours, with lessons seemingly being based around lectures.

“I do believe they would sell well. However...” Brigitte glanced over at Damuel, bemusement visible in her amethyst eyes. I followed her gaze to

see that he was frowning anxiously.

“Do you have a problem with this, Damuel?”

“Writing out notes on boards to sell and attending classes for others in order to transcribe lectures for them are some of the few ways for laynobles at the Royal Academy to earn disposable income. If you started to distribute study resources based on Lord Ferdinand and Lord Eckhart’s notes, I am certain there are many students who will end up losing out.”

I couldn’t just go and quash a valuable source of money for poor students. Before I went about selling study resources myself, I would need to find an alternative for them.

“I thought it would be a good way to boost the education level in Ehrenfest, but I see that I will need to think about it more carefully first.”

“Thank you.”

As we continued our discussion, an ordonnanz flew in for Brigitte. The ivory bird flapped its wings, landed on her wrist, and then began speaking in Ferdinand’s voice. It seemed that the Plantin Company had requested a meeting with me; there was something they wanted to discuss before summer came.

Since I had Earthdays off, there was enough leeway for me to return to the temple. I had Brigitte make a reply ordonnanz, which I then spoke to.

“This is Rozemyne. Once I have completed Fruitday’s Mana Replenishment, I shall return to the temple until Waterday, when I am required for the next one. Please inform Gil that I would like to meet the Plantin Company in the morning on Waterday.”

“There is work here for you to complete on Earthday as well,” Ferdinand responded in turn. “Come to my room at third bell.”

And with that, my entire weekend disappeared. I had been spending so much of my time in the castle casually reading lately that I would probably have a hard time readjusting to this new schedule.

That night at dinner, I informed Bonifatius and Wilfried of my weekend plans.

“I will be absent from the castle after Mana Replenishment on Fruitday to check the workshop and orphanage in the temple. I shall return in time for Mana Replenishment on Waterday.”

“I see. Do not overdo it,” Bonifatius said with a nod, being a man of

relatively few words. He looked a lot like Karstedt—quite broad-shouldered and rather musclebound for someone his age—though he was much more blunt and often had a sharp gleam in his eyes. I even found him a little scary, but I had been assured by Cornelius that he actually had an enormous soft spot for me, which was impressive given that it was apparently rare for him to show any concern for the well-being of others; when my brothers got sick, he would normally just bark at them for being frail and weak.

In my case, Bonifatius had been warned by Karstedt that so much as a shout could cause me to literally drop dead. And after realizing how sickly I really was from my multiple fainting episodes in the castle, he was doing his best to keep his distance, terrified about being anywhere near a child who would collapse from something as minor as getting struck by a single fateful snowball. That explained why he always seemed to be avoiding me to some degree.

"You'll really be okay traveling to the temple by highbeast after performing the Mana Replenishment? You're strong in the weirdest of ways, Rozemyne; running around's enough to almost kill you, but somehow you can handle Mana Replenishment without batting an eye," Wilfried grumbled with a frown. Just moving mana from the feystones was enough to exhaust him, so he found it hard to believe that I could travel to the temple right after performing the Replenishment.

"Mana and stamina are two very different things," I replied tersely. It helped that I was used to moving mana around my body, and since I used mana for things all the time, I never ended up with too much built up inside of me. Compared to my commoner days where I was forced to endure my mana always swelling to bursting-point, life was good.

And so came Fruitday. I returned to the temple after finishing the usual Mana Replenishment, by which time it was late enough for seventh bell.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne," my lined-up attendants greeted me. I was suddenly overwhelmed with nostalgia, like it had been ages since I last saw them.

"I have returned. Has anything changed in my absence?"

When I returned to my chambers, I was led straight to an already prepared bath. Then, once I had been washed, it was time to receive my pre-bed reports. Fran served me some tea before joining Zahm to speak first,

since they had managed the High Bishop's chambers while I was gone, and together with Monika they reported no notable changes aside from going to the High Priest's chambers rather than the High Bishop's to do work.

"That said, while your chambers remain unchanged, the temple as a whole has been transforming little by little," Fran began.

"Now that Brother Kampfer and Brother Frietack are highly valued by the High Priest for their assistance, several blue priests have begun to show an interest in administrative work," Zahm continued.

The blue priests who had previously found themselves in a neutral position reportedly observed Kampfer and Frietack, then approached Ferdinand to join them. He had subsequently determined that there was no harm in recruiting them, considering their former neutrality, and began training them as well.

These priests had spent most of their lives doing nothing even close to resembling work, so they were being put through the wringer in the same way as Kampfer and Frietack, who watched the new recruits with warm eyes while remembering having endured the same hellish trials themselves.

"The High Priest has been brimming with life lately. He also consumes dramatically fewer of those potions you were so worried about him relying on," Fran said.

"No doubt due to the fact that he can now entrust his work to others. It feels as though he finally has some breathing room in his schedule."

Ferdinand being able to complete his work without relying on potions meant that his successors were being trained at a reasonable pace. I could imagine the blue priests were having a rough time due to his brutal training methods, but... all's well that ends well.

"Gil, Fritz—how goes the workshop?" I asked, my eyes drawn to the new picture book in Gil's hand. With Fran and Zahm done, it was their turn to give reports, and what I wanted to know more than anything was how printing was advancing in the workshop.

Noticing my gaze, Gil grinned and held out the book. "We have finished the picture book on the winter subordinates," he announced.

I took the book and stroked its cover, which was covered with scattered red petals and looked very fancy. Red was, of course, the divine color of winter. I then brought the book to my face and rubbed my cheek against it, inhaling the sharp scent of ink that pierced my senses. It was a heavenly

smell that made me melt right then and there.

After enjoying that brief moment, I lined one of each picture book stored in my chambers on the table. There was one book for the King and Queen alongside the Eternal Five, then one for each of the individual seasons' subordinate gods. The children's picture bible set was complete, and an emotional sigh unconsciously escaped my lips.

"Aaah, there's nothing quite so pristinely beautiful as a complete set of books. How splendid. Shall we pray to the gods in honor and appreciation of my Gutenbergs? Praise be to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom and Kunstzeal the Goddess of Art!" I declared, shooting both arms into the air.

Gil gave a big nod, his deep-purple eyes shining proudly. "I knew you would like it, Lady Rozemyne."

"Well done, Gil. Well done. I am blessed to have such fine workers as attendants. Now, what shall we print next? We must keep up the pace and produce an ever-growing catalog of books. Eheheh."

Fran sighed with exasperation, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Lady Rozemyne, you are getting too excited. Please contain yourself. Zahm and Fritz are becoming unsettled."

Even though I had only let out a sliver of my true feelings, both Zahm and Fritz were visibly uncomfortable, wearing stiff expressions as they averted their eyes.

"Both of you, this is how Lady Rozemyne normally reacts when presented with books," Fran explained. "Please get used to it sooner rather than later."

Ignoring that, I stacked up the picture books and hugged them to my chest, carrying them over to the nearby bookcase where I delicately started lining them up. The fact that I could step back and admire a full row of books in my own room was enough to make me sigh with bliss.

Aaah, it's so wonderful. Could there be anything better than both the book rooms and my own chambers simultaneously filling with new books? How should I express my joy at more and more being brought into existence?

"I would like to share this bliss with everyone in the world," I mused aloud.

"Won't you be doing that by selling the books after the Starbind Ceremony?" Gil asked.

You know what... That's a great way to put it.

I looked up with glistening eyes. "Indeed. I will share it with everyone. But I would also like to use this opportunity to create more books as well. Gil, do you think you would be able to finish the collection of knight stories before the Starbind Ceremony?"

Gil tilted his head in thought, counted something on his fingers, then shook his head regretfully. "We've finished three of the short stories, but I don't think we have enough time to print them all."

"Both typesetting and proofreading takes a significant amount of time, so we could perhaps finish two more short stories at best," Fritz added, taking out the half-finished collection. "Lady Rozemyne, how would you recommend we bind these together? Would you have each story bound individually, or all of them combined into one? Please advise."

I skimmed the three available knight stories while considering the best way to sell them. Given that each individual customer would be ordering whatever covers they liked regardless of what method we chose, there would almost certainly be no problem with us binding the short stories individually. Plus, it was possible that someone might only be able to afford a single story rather than the entire collection.

"Bind each short story individually, if you would. I shall sell whatever we have ready by the Starbind Ceremony."

"As you wish."

"Lady Rozemyne, now that the picture books are finished, the mimeograph printers are available again. Is there anything else you would like to print? If there is something you need, we shall make sure it is done," Gil said very heroically.

I pulled open one of my desk drawers and took out my list of potential books that I wanted to make. "Text-heavy books look neater and overall more visually appealing when produced with letterpress printers, so we should use the mimeographs for books that predominantly contain illustrations, charts, and the like. I wonder what I should print, then...?" I pondered aloud.

If we were going to be selling whatever I decided on after the Starbind Ceremony, then I would want to produce something that met the needs of adults, in contrast to the products I had sold in the winter playroom. Perhaps I could print the recipe books and sheet music that I had previously

considered putting off until I had more leeway.

“Recipes and sheet music are well suited for mimeograph printing, but I should discuss this matter with Ferdinand before anything else.”

I didn’t have that much time to spend in the temple, and trying to complete everything that I wanted to do meant that I was going to be exceedingly busy. I needed to help Ferdinand in his chambers from third bell tomorrow anyway, so I decided to use that opportunity to ask about the recipes and sheet music.

Once I had voiced these plans to Fran while writing them down in my diptych, I slid into bed.

Had I been in the castle, this Earthday would have been a wonderful day off spent holed up in the book room, but it was always the same old routine in the temple. At third bell, I promptly headed to Ferdinand’s chambers.

“Excuse me, Ferdinand.”

“Ah, there you are. Now, allow me to introduce you to the blue priests who have since begun working here,” Ferdinand said as he glanced up from his paperwork.

A few blue priests I had barely ever seen before stopped their own work to kneel. They seemed to be the ones Ferdinand was in the middle of training since they were currently battling through stacks upon stacks of boards with their calculators, just as I had done in the past.

Once Ferdinand had finished introducing me to the blue priests, he asked about life in the castle, which meant I could finally get to the point. I excitedly leaned over the desk and began to talk about the books I wanted to make.

“I’ve finished all of my picture books about the gods, so I was thinking of using the mimeograph printers to create collections of sheet music and recipes next. May I print and sell a book of the songs you played at the concert?” I asked. While I had of course been the one to introduce those songs to this world in the first place, it was Ferdinand and Rosina who arranged my humming into sheet music that could be played on the harspiel.

Ferdinand gave a light shrug. “They are not my songs, so as long as you do not couple them with any unwelcome illustrations, you may do with them as you like.”

“Oh? But I was going to put your name in the credits, as the composer. I’m yet unable to write sheet music, and it’s thanks to you that the song is playable on the harspiel at all.”

“I merely arranged your humming. I did not compose any songs, and thus should not receive such recognition,” Ferdinand replied firmly. But I didn’t want to identify myself as the composer either; I was simply remembering the songs from my Urano days, so I certainly couldn’t claim to have composed them.

“How can I call myself a composer when I cannot even play the songs?” I sighed.

“Composing and playing are two entirely different actions. If you are to include credits, keep them accurate.”

My plan had been to push the showy position onto Ferdinand, but he blocked me entirely. It was no issue, though—I would simply list Ferdinand and Rosina as the *arrangers* in big letters, then credit myself as the inspiration in much smaller letters beneath them.

“Incidentally, I would also like to make a book titled *Rozemyne’s Ravishing Recipes*. Is there anything I should know in advance?”

“You may print a book of recipes, but wait until next winter to put it up for sale. You would also do well to sell them at a time when all nobles are gathered together. Draw their attention with new recipes this Starbind Ceremony, then spread rumors of the recipe book and its price. It should be an expensive product, unlike your other books.”

I hadn’t yet settled on a final price for the recipe book. It would probably be wise to meet with Benno to decide whether I should keep it in line with how much Sylvester had paid for the recipes, or sell limited editions to give a premiere feeling and jack up the price.

“In that case, I shall prepare to print the sheet music and recipe book. Would it be okay for me to have Rosina write out the sheet music?”

“Indeed. She will most likely be perfect for the job,” Ferdinand said, granting his permission immediately. He had seen Rosina’s work firsthand when arranging my humming with her, so he knew that she had both beautiful handwriting and a strong grasp on music theory.

“Is that all you have to report? If so, begin your work. There is quite a lot of math that has built up.”

And so, I faced my first mountain of boards in a long time, scrawling

away at a slate as I worked through them. Meanwhile, the newbie blue priests widened their eyes and muttered that I was simply too good; it seemed they weren't yet working fast enough to satisfy Ferdinand.

"Do not just watch her. You are already slow enough; the least you can do is work without such unnecessary pauses," Ferdinand chastised, not even looking up from his own work.

The blue priests inhaled sharply and quickly got back to moving their calculators. They still weren't used to using them, and their movements were clumsy enough that I could guess it would be quite some time before they actually started speeding up.

Fourth bell rang soon enough, signaling that it was time for lunch. I returned to my chambers, having finished my calculating work, and quickly approached Rosina, who was playing harspiel.

"Rosina, I would like to entrust you with writing out sheet music," I said. "Ferdinand has already given me his permission."

She paused mid-strum, blinked several times, then slowly tilted her head. As always, she moved with such grace that even the simplest gestures appeared utterly breathtaking.

"What sheet music, might I ask?"

"Sheet music for all the songs that Ferdinand played at his harspiel concert. I am going to sell them as a book, so I ask that you transcribe them as carefully as you can. Please also write the song titles and arrangers' names in beautiful letters."

"As you wish. I shall draw the finest sheet music I can, so that I may live up to what is expected of me as your personal musician."

Rosina gracefully accepted the job, which was unsurprising, since she generally loved to do anything involving music. I asked her to include Ferdinand as the arranger, putting my name as the inspiration in small letters beneath it.

"Might I also add more sheet music for songs of my own arrangement?" she asked, placing a thoughtful hand on her cheek and momentarily averting her gaze.

I of course accepted the suggestion with open arms. "Absolutely. The more books we have, the better. Once you have completed the sheet music, please pass it all to Fritz and Gil. I have informed them to begin printing as soon as everything is ready."

“I understand that you are excited, Lady Rozemyne, but please eat lunch before discussing printing matters,” Fran interjected, dousing my excitement with cold water. In a way, he sounded like my mother from my Urano days—she was always equally exasperated when I ended up so absorbed in my reading that I forgot to eat.

“I suppose you’re right,” I said with a light shrug before taking my seat at the table. That was when Nicola came in carrying our food.

“Lady Rozemyne, lunch is more elaborate today due to Hugo’s assistance. He competed with Ella by preparing many of the new recipes he learned for the Italian restaurant. I am quite looking forward to the leftovers,” she said happily as she lined up the plates.

That reminded me—there was something that I wanted to ask her.

“Nicola, I have decided to make a recipe book for my favorite foods.”

“Oh my, a recipe book?” Nicola replied, clapping her hands together in excitement. “I can’t wait for more people to get to enjoy this delicious food.”

I proceeded to ask her to tell Hugo and Ella to write out the recipes I had taught them. This would have been a lot simpler had I been able to speak to the chefs myself, but it wasn’t easy for the adopted daughter of an archduke to just waltz into the kitchen.

“I would like to discuss this with Hugo and Ella in more detail, but first, they need to finish writing down the recipes. Furthermore, I wonder whether they could separate the relatively traditional, easier-to-make foods from the more unique, complex ones that require more preparation. Once we’ve decided on the exact recipes, we can—”

“Lady Rozemyne. As I said, please wait to discuss printing until after lunch,” Fran repeated, gripping the pitcher of water in his hand with an icy cold smile.

That isn’t good.

“My apologies. I shall begin eating at once,” I said, picking up my cutlery.

Nicola, sensing Fran’s wrath, quickly retreated to the kitchen while talking about preparing the next course.

No sooner had I taken my first bite of a seasonal salad and started chewing than yet another thing came to mind. “Monika, forgive me for only just remembering this, but please go to the workshop and borrow the

needles and thread necessary for binding books."

"Lady Rozemyne, printing talk must wait."

"Th-This isn't printing talk. It's bookbinding talk—or, um, rather, preparation for my afternoon plans," I replied, hurriedly attempting to justify myself.

Fran started rubbing his temples. He really was similar to Ferdinand, who I was certain would be launching some sharp rebukes my way right about now had he been here. Maybe this likeness had become so much more evident lately because, while I was staying at the castle, Fran was doing his work in Ferdinand's chambers.

After seeing Monika out of the room, I continued my meal, actually staying quiet this time. Only once I was finished could we finally start bookbinding.

I bound the collection of Mom's stories that I had been gradually piecing together since winter, the cover art of which was a family illustration I had drawn myself. It had been done in a cartoony style, which I wasn't sure the people of this world would look upon too fondly, but I had no other choice since I didn't have any photos to use.

...Once I finish this one-of-a-kind handmade picture book, I'll have Lutz deliver it to my family.

Meeting with the Plantin Company

Today I would be having a discussion with the Plantin Company. At third bell, I left the High Bishop's chambers with letters for my family and the completed collection of Mom's stories.

Tralala, tralala. I get to meet Lutz todaaay!

When I arrived at the orphanage director's chambers, Benno, Mark, Lutz, and even Otto were already on the first floor waiting for me, drinking tea served by Monika.

"Thank you for your patience," I announced.

Once we had finished exchanging the usual lengthy formal greetings, we climbed the stairs and went straight into the hidden room.

"Yaaay! Lutz, Lutz, Lutz! I've missed you sooo much! How's my family doing? Is everyone okay?" I asked, leaping onto him as soon as we were inside.

Lutz caught me, having expected this entirely, and patted my head with a grin. "Your family got real nervous when I told them you'd be stuck in the castle until summer while the archduke's away. They thought for sure that you'd mess something up somehow."

"So mean! I've been doing my job there just fine!"

I was stunned by how little faith everyone had in me. The legend of me being a saint had really been taking root among the nobles lately, so it was possible that my family trusted my capabilities less than literally everyone else.

"And I worked so hard to make this book for Tuuli, too..."

"That book?"

"Yeah. She turns ten this summer, right? It's my gift to her. Could you deliver it for me?"

Here, when children turned seven, they were baptized and taken on as apprentices. These contracts lasted three years and ended when they turned ten, so in many ways, this was a pivotal age: kids either renewed their contracts, signed ones with new workshops, or got taken on as leherls due

to their talent.

In addition to this, the skirt length for girls changed from knee- to shin-high. You really couldn't treat them as complete kids anymore. In Earth terms, it was like graduating elementary school to become like middle or high schoolers instead. They were still underage, but not exactly children.

For Tuuli's tenth birth season, I was giving her a collection of Mom's short stories as a present.

"Oh, that reminds me—Tuuli was talking about wanting to move to Corinna's workshop when she turned ten, but how did that turn out? Is she going to join?" I asked, looking around at the members of the Plantin Company while continuing to hug Lutz.

Benno glanced over at Otto before answering. "That's what we're here to talk about. We want your thoughts on it."

"Wha?"

At Benno and Mark's prompting, I released my grip on Lutz and sat down at the table. Benno and Otto were seated opposite me, with Mark and Lutz standing behind them.

"You're up, Otto. The Gilberta Company's not my store anymore, so you've gotta handle this one yourself," Benno said, giving him a light nudge with his elbow.

Otto looked at me, but his eyes quickly began to wander. "Er... I can't call her Myne anymore, right? Should I just go with Lady Rozemyne? Man, that feels so weird..." he muttered to himself, before taking a deep breath. "You know Tuuli's lehange contract ends this spring, right? She's gotta decide on her next workplace by summer, so I asked Benno to set up this meeting."

It seemed that the main topic of discussion was Tuuli's future workplace, but I didn't understand how that involved me. Why did my opinion matter here?

"Tuuli's on the road to signing with the Gilberta Company, and we consider her a very important asset," he continued. "Not many people know the circumstances behind all this, but since she has connections to you, the archduke's adopted daughter, she'll be the most important hair stick craftswoman we have."

Tuuli was working hard to think up new flowers and ways to make them, and right now, I was only buying hair sticks from her and Mom. The

Gilberta Company wanted to sign a leherl contract with Tuuli to secure connections with me, since I was one of the most profitable customers possible.

“Up until recently, Corinna has let Benno handle the work that’s outside of her realm of interest. But now he’s started the Plantin Company, taking Mark and Lutz with him, meaning she’s lost all the people connected to you. See what I mean?”

“So that’s why you want Tuuli in the Gilberta Company.”

“Exactly.”

Corinna wanted Tuuli in her workshop to strengthen the connection between me and the Gilberta Company. I nodded, feeling somewhat detached from the whole situation, when Benno interjected.

“We’re not just talking about hair sticks here, either. You thought up that new dress for your knight, yeah? That thing’s important enough that Corinna’s trying to stay connected to you in any way she can.”

“Oh, I see. Very interesting...”

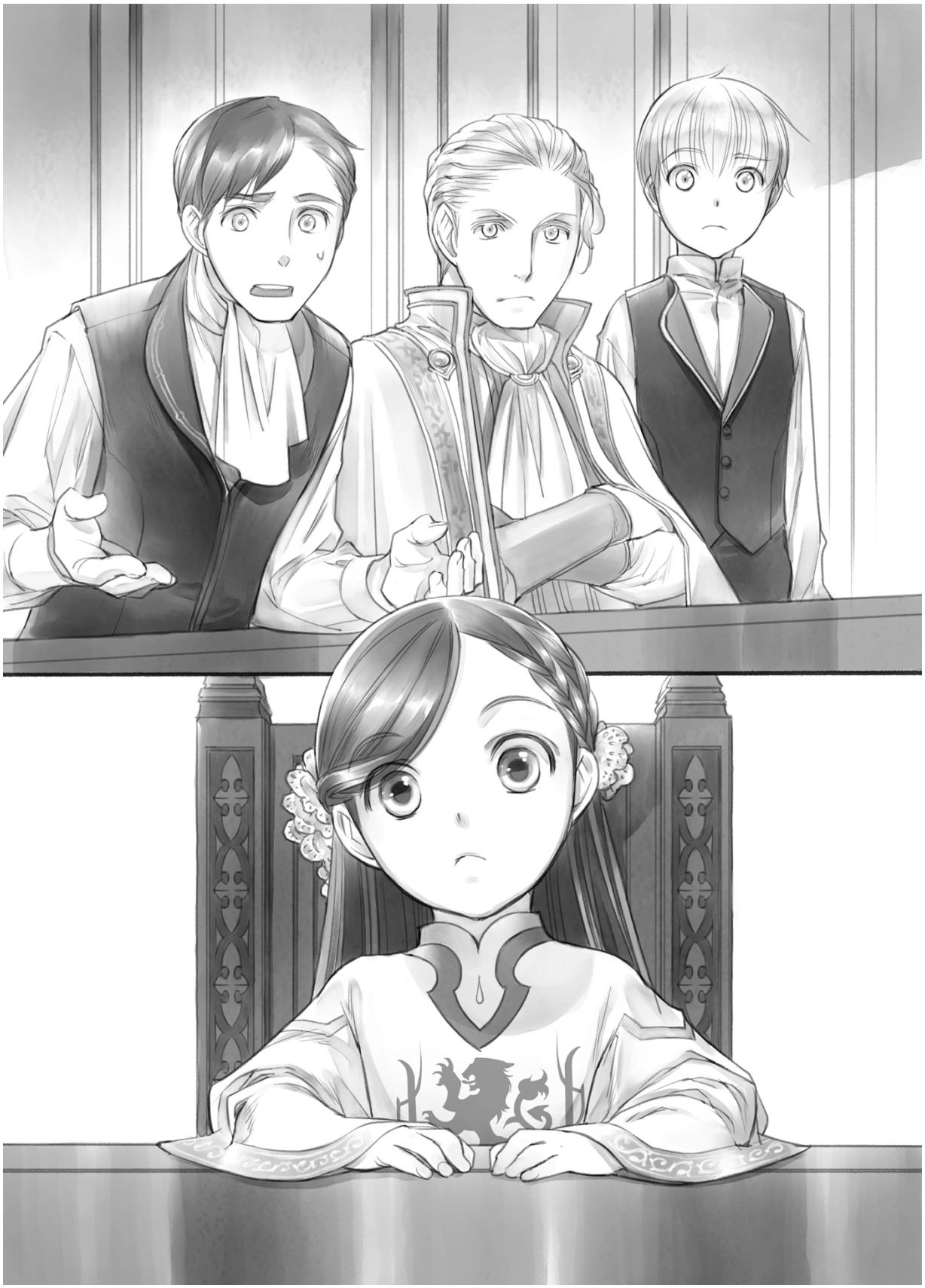
“You don’t really sound like you care about this,” Lutz observed.

I responded with a big nod. To me, this seemed like the most pointless conversation of all time.

“Just know this—if you exploit Tuuli for the store’s gain and make her cry, I’ll make sure you suffer for it,” I said firmly. “But right now, it appears that she wants to join Corinna’s workshop, and Corinna wants her. What’s the problem? Why does my opinion on any of this matter?” They could simply have her sign a leherl contract and be done with it.

Otto gave a troubled frown. “Everyone involved wants Tuuli to join Corinna’s workshop, so that’s naturally what we’re working toward, but the question is whether she should get a leherl or a lehange contract.”

I knew from Lutz’s circumstances that apprentices were treated differently based on their contracts, but since I could hardly call myself an expert on the matter, I looked to Benno for details. “The treatment she receives will vary based on which one she signs, right?”



“Right, right. Leherls are fundamentally treated better than lehanges, but they’ve got less freedom, too.”

Lehanges could get experience at a variety of different workshops by changing location every three years. They could improve their skills and establish a wider range of connections, but there wasn’t much in the way of job security—if their work wasn’t satisfactory, they weren’t guaranteed to receive a recommendation for a new workshop or have their existing contract renewed. And if they couldn’t find a new workplace, they really would struggle to survive.

Leherls, on the other hand, lived where they worked, didn’t have to hunt for jobs, and received better treatment overall. In return, however, they were chained to one store for their entire lives. Just as Zack and Johann had said, they couldn’t go independent, and they couldn’t move to other workshops. Lutz and Mark had followed the Plantin Company when it split from the Gilberta Company, which was acceptable enough at the time, but they couldn’t go back now that it was an entirely new store.

“Assuming Tuuli does sign a leherl contract with the Gilberta Company, the strongest chain tying her down will be you, Rozemyne.”

“Wait, me?!” I exclaimed, slapping my hands against my cheeks and gasping in shock. “How would I be tying her down?” Never would I have thought that *I’d* be the one holding back my big sister, especially considering all she had done for me. A casual discussion wasn’t enough; something needed to be done, and quick.

As I leaned forward, the blood draining from my face, Lutz laughed and dismissively waved his hand. “Nah, nah. You’ve got the wrong idea. It’s not that you’re literally holding her back—the problem is that she wants to be able to follow you wherever you go.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not really following his point.

After looking at Benno, Lutz gave a small nod and continued. “The Plantin Company’s prepared to follow you to another city if we have to, and that means both Master Benno and me. If we’re gonna be printing and selling books, we’re best off sticking with someone who loves them as insanely much as you do.”

It seemed that, as I was the printing industry’s wealthiest supporter, the Plantin Company were willing to accompany me wherever I went to spread both the Plant Paper Guild and the Printing Guild. They would be very

strong allies for me.

“And when I mentioned this to Tuuli, she said that she’d want to come with us too,” Lutz explained.

Up until now, both he and Tuuli had assumed everything would be fine once she joined Corinna’s workshop in the Gilberta Company; she could stay connected to and meet with me simply by following Lutz and Benno. But now the Plantin Company had split from the Gilberta Company, with one dealing in printing and the other in clothing and accessories. If she became a leherl for the Gilberta Company, she wouldn’t be able to leave the store, and since they were an Ehrenfest-based company through and through, they weren’t going to follow me anywhere I went.

“Mm? So Tuuli wants a lehange contract just in case? But, I mean, here I am in Ehrenfest. Ferdinand said that Sylvester would never let me go, and as far as I’m aware, my future will most likely be spent wed to his successor,” I said. That prediction was mostly just based on what I’d heard from Ferdinand, but with my saint legend and the printing industry spreading as quickly as they were, it was hard to imagine Sylvester ever sending me to another duchy.

“But that’s just what the archduke’s *hoping for*, right?” Benno asked. “There are plenty of duchies stronger than Ehrenfest out there. If some political forces throw their weight around, it’s not hard to imagine you being forced into an arranged marriage.”

“That’s true...” I whispered in reply. Now that I thought about it, while I had learned a lot about Ehrenfest’s geography, I barely knew anything about the world beyond it. At most, I was aware from my retainers that we were somewhere in the middle of the rankings in the Royal Academy, where nobles from all across the country gathered. It wouldn’t be surprising for Benno’s fears to become a reality.

“If you’re gonna stay in Ehrenfest forever, there won’t be any problems. However,” Benno continued, glaring at me with gleaming dark-red eyes, “what worries me more than any political power is you going on a rampage. I can already see you demanding to change your betrothal to whoever has the biggest book stash, just like you rushed to join the temple the moment you found its book room.”

“Ngh...”

I could hardly argue back when I’d already set such a damning

precedent. Maybe due to how long he'd known me, Benno had a good grasp on how I thought and acted; there was nothing I could say to convince him that I *wouldn't* do something like that.

"If you do lose control, we have no way of predicting where you'll end up," Benno concluded.

Welp... Neither do I, really.

Back in the day, the plan had been for me to think up inventions to sell while doing work at home, but I had gone on one of my aforementioned "rampages" after finding the book room during my baptism and subsequently ended up as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. Considering the other unpredictable events that had followed, resulting in me becoming the High Bishop and archduke's adopted daughter, I could hardly call Benno's worries unfounded.

I gave Benno a big smile, trying to look as cute as possible as an impromptu distraction, but that just made him narrow his eyes. "This isn't something to smile about, idiot."

With that, I quickly averted my gaze and turned to Otto, eager to change the subject. "So, um... the Gilberta Company wants to secure Tuuli with a leherl contract, but she wants to be a lehange so she can follow me wherever I might go, correct?"

"Correct. Any ideas?"

"Mm... How about you sign her on as a leherl, and in the worst-case scenario, open a (franchise) to move her elsewhere?"

"A what now?"

"Like... build a second Gilberta Company in another city and have her work there."

"A second Gilberta Company? So not an entirely new store?"

"Right. Employees of the Gilberta Company can come and go as they please, and communication-wise, it would be treated as the same store. That way, Tuuli can continue working as a leherl for the Gilberta Company in another city."

Despite my attempt at an explanation, everyone present—most notably Benno, Mark, and Otto—looked utterly lost. Chain stores didn't exist here, and few people who lived in cities went out of their way to move to another. There were cases where the owner of one successful store might end up marrying someone who also owned a store, but in a city where you could

walk from one end to the other without much issue, there was no point in establishing more than one shop for any particular business. I couldn't blame them for not understanding store franchises when they weren't even really a concept yet.

"Well, putting aside all that complicated stuff, I don't think it would be a major problem to give her a lehange contract," I said.

Franchising was ultimately a compromise, and my main priority was ensuring Tuuli could take whatever path she wanted. I supported her joining Corinna's workshop since she looked up to Corinna and wanted to work with her, but I didn't see the need to bind her to the Gilberta Company for life.

"You want to secure Tuuli as a leherl for your own sake, not hers, right?" I asked. "Well, if she intends to follow me, I can prepare a workshop for her at the snap of my fingers. I would be happier with her having more freedom as a lehange."

I had no plans to leave Ehrenfest unless I was forced to marry someone from another duchy. And even in such a case, with Myne's savings and the money I had now, I could afford citizenship, a home, and a workshop for Tuuli wherever I moved. And in the event that I did stay in Ehrenfest forever, she was skilled enough that she could use my support as the archduke's adopted daughter to start up her own workshop once she got older. There were plenty of ways for me to support her, even if she didn't become a leherl.

"...Yeah, you do have the money and power to help her all on your own now," Otto murmured, his tone somewhat bitter. He had spent his entire life walking the tough road of a traveling merchant; it had taken all his savings to purchase citizenship and secure his marriage to Corinna.

"Well, with all that said, if we assume that I *am* going to be staying in Ehrenfest, it would be best for Tuuli to sign a leherl contract with Corinna. This way, she'll receive the best treatment and have a better quality of life," I said, earning me a nod from Otto. "But at the very least, suggest franchising to Corinna and see what she thinks about it."

"Alright. I'll pass this all on to Tuuli as well—the franchising stuff, and that you'll set up a workshop for her if you have to," Lutz said. And with that, our discussion on the matter came to an end.

After shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Benno leaned forward.

“Alright, that’s enough about Tuuli. I’ve got a request for you as head of the Plantin Company. I’ve made all the preparations to send Lutz to Illgner; could you make the arrangements with Giebe Illgner?”

“Hm? Are you going to be okay doing business with nobles?” I seemed to recall that he’d had so much more business with nobles recently that he didn’t have enough people to meet with them all, leaving him unable to send Lutz off on a trip.

Benno scratched his head and gave a vague grunt. From behind him, the previously silent Mark spoke up, his dark-green eyes crinkling in a smile.

“The lehanges sent from various stores to work for the Plantin Company are all the best of the best,” he explained, “which is allowing us to handle business with nobles more easily than before. We now have a few hands to spare.” It seemed that the lehanges sent to redistribute Benno’s monopoly among their own stores were so extremely competent that even Mark was impressed.

“Thing is, the Plantin Store doesn’t have many products,” Benno continued. “The more new goods we have that’ll catch the attention of nobles, the better. And when it comes to getting info out of you to make new things, there’s no person I want there more than our leherl Lutz.”

“I’m the best person they have for researching new types of paper since I’ve made so much already. I promised to make everything you thought up, didn’t I?” Lutz said, puffing out his chest.

“With the printing press complete and the picture books getting finished up, it’s true that now is as good a time as any to start thinking of new products. I’ll be able to speak to Giebe Illgner sometime around the next Starbind Ceremony.”

“...That’s sooner than I expected. I thought we’d have to wait until winter socializing at least.”

“Giebe Illgner was informed that Brigitte would be debuting a dress I designed at the Starbind Ceremony and decided to come to Ehrenfest to see the reveal. I believe I should be able to use that opportunity to send the Plantin Company to Illgner to start researching new potential materials for paper.”

Illgner was personally invested in this matter, since he wanted to strengthen his connection with me and secure more export opportunities. Given our respective statuses, he couldn’t refuse my request regardless, but

he certainly wouldn’t want to. All I needed to be careful of was making sure I didn’t accidentally force him outside his comfort zone by misusing my authority.

“Alright. I’d assumed you could only talk to long-distance nobles in the winter, but if this is happening in the summer, I’ll need to hurry up with the preparations.”

“That said, Illgner is so far away that if we’re going to be doing research over there, we won’t be able to return to Ehrenfest for some time,” I mused. “Are you sure the Plantin Company will be okay for that long without Mark and Lutz?” No matter how skilled those lehanges were, surely it would be hard for Benno to manage things all by himself.

Hearing my concerns, Benno gave a bitter smile and shook his head. “Mark’ll be staying behind to help run the store. In his place, I’ll send one of the lehanges capable of dealing with nobles.”

Does such a person exist...? I wondered, furrowing my brow as I failed to think of anyone who could take Mark’s place. “Who are you sending? We’ll be traveling to Illgner on my highbeast. Will they be able to handle that?”

“That won’t be a problem. He actually knows who you are already. In fact, he was saying that he’s seen and spoken to you before.”

At that, Benno, Mark, and Lutz all exchanged exhausted looks. Hearing that this person had supposedly met me already just confused me even more. I barely knew anyone back when I was a commoner, especially not an apprentice merchant capable of dealing with nobles.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about. Who is it?”

“Damian—Freida’s older brother.”

The ever profit-hungry Othmar Company had sent Damian to the Plantin Company as a lehange. It seemed that Freida had lit a fire under her brothers, demanding to know why they wouldn’t do everything they could to get involved with Lady Rozemyne’s new business if they claimed to be good merchants.

“Oh, right. I did meet him once during Freida’s baptism ceremony. In fact, I met most of Freida’s family when I stayed at the guildmaster’s place that one time. She has two older brothers, but I barely remember what either one looks like. What I *do* remember, though, is that they were all very assertive people who didn’t listen to what others said at all.”

“And you’re exactly right—he’s got a sharp nose for profit and is about as pushy as can be.”

Judging by Benno’s expression, Damian was probably working in the shadows more than anyone else to maximize his own profit within the Plantin Company. Everyone said that Freida resembled her grandfather the guildmaster most of all, but her older brother Damian was no slouch himself.

“Lutz, will you be okay with him? You won’t let Damian talk you into a corner?” I asked, my worry now directed at him. I wasn’t sure whether he would be able to resist Damian’s manipulativeness on his own, and it seemed that he was just as concerned; rather than puffing out his chest with confidence, he let out a dry laugh and shot Benno a worried look.

“I’m concerned about Lutz as well, but removing Damian isn’t an option,” Benno said.

“Why not?”

“He’s one of the best when it comes to dealing with nobles, he knows how to hold back on something to make more money down the line, and most importantly, he cares more about the invention of new products than selling existing ones. I also can’t turn down that old geezer—he and the other stores are forcing Damian on us to keep an eye on things, plus he’s been oddly cooperative lately. I bet I’ll need to return the favor a little to keep things that way.

“I’m going to come with you on the first trip to Illgner to establish the Plant Paper Guild and sign some contracts as its representative. I’ll leave Lutz and Damian there, then accompany you when you return to Ehrenfest. Nothing we can do from there but lay some groundwork and prepare.”

“Please prepare whatever you can for Lutz’s sake, okay?”

From there, we discussed the money that would be made from producing plant paper in Illgner; we wouldn’t be able to negotiate with the giebe if we didn’t have it all worked out beforehand. I wrote down how the profits would be divided between us, notes for our stay in Illgner, and what demands and conditions to bring to the table.

“Okay, so we’re sure that Lutz and Damian will be going to Illgner with us, right?” I asked, looking over my diptych once everything had been settled.

Lutz raised a hand into the air. “Uh, I kind of want to bring a few gray

priests used to working in the Rozemyne Workshop with us as well. Is that an option? I can't really make paper on my own, and I'd suffocate working alone with Damian. We can prepare the tools ourselves, we just need the manpower."

"My official reason for visiting Illgner is to research plant paper, so of course I'll bring some of my workers. You and Gil can decide on whom."

"That's good to hear," Lutz said with a genuinely relieved sigh.

"I'm the one who wants new paper researched, so I really should be going there to do it myself. I appreciate you and Gil working hard in my place, so if you have any requests, don't hold back; I'll do whatever I can for you two."

"Thanks, but don't worry about it too much. Heck, I'm just looking forward to going to Illgner at all," Lutz said with a laugh, the tension draining from his shoulders.

I let out my own sigh of relief. "It is a special occasion, isn't it? I hope we can find some new types of wood, as well as alternatives to edile fruit and shram bugs."

"Yeah. It'll be nice if we can make new paper and get more products," Lutz said, flashing a merchant's grin. Benno nodded, adding that they really did need new things to sell.

"Oh, I'll definitely be making more products for you—that is, more and more books. I have plans in place to print sheet music, and come winter, you'll have a copy of *Rozemyne's Ravishing Recipes*," I said, proudly puffing out my chest. But then I remembered something—

"Right, right. We're still in the middle of determining what price the recipe book should be..." I mused aloud. "I'm not sure whether we should base the price on what we charged Father and Sylvester, or whether we should make it a limited edition version so we can jack up the price."

"Isn't that obvious? Go for the limited edition version," Benno replied, raising his eyebrows as though saying that I shouldn't have even needed to waste his time with such a basic question.

Mark smiled and nodded from behind Benno while he continued.

"Hugo mentioned this before, but your recipes require pretty skilled chefs, given that they're a real pain in the neck and take so many steps to make. Plus, they're all completely new. Of course the recipe book should be expensive. Don't make it cheap unless you wanna spread the recipes

everywhere and lower their value. Keep it premium and gouge the heck outta them," Benno said, a glint of enthusiasm in his eyes.

As always, putting a high value on my otherworldly wisdom seemed to be the right call, and there was no reason for me to deny the advice of my teacher in anything business-related.

"Anyway," he continued, "a recipe book, huh? Pretty sure you'll be able to sell it to that old geezer if you put in some recipes that Leise doesn't know. Make as much bank as you can here."

"Just so you know, Benno, you have a downright evil look on your face right now."

The Archducal Couple Returns

Several days had passed since I concluded my meeting with the Plantin Company and returned to the castle. Angelica was called outside Wilfried's room while he and I were taking our afternoon lessons, then promptly returned to say something to Rihyarda and Oswald.

"Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried—Aub Ehrenfest shall be returning quite soon," Rihyarda announced. "Let us go and greet him."

Despite having heard what she said loud and clear, I simply continued reading and gave a half-hearted, "Okaaay."

"Father and Mother are back?!" Wilfried exclaimed excitedly as Rihyarda snatched the history book out of my hands with a fear-inducing smile.

"Studying can continue when we return. Come with us, milady."

At Rihyarda's prompting, Wilfried and I made our way to the teleporter room. The knights standing guard opened the door to let us inside once we arrived.

No sooner had we entered than the teleportation circle began to shine. The complex patterns of the magic circle appeared, and a second later, Sylvester, Florencia, and Karstedt were standing atop it. Wilfried immediately rushed over to welcome them back.

"We're home, Wilfried, Rozemyne. Did you keep working diligently?" Florencia asked.

"Of course, Mother. We completed every Mana Replenishment. Right, Rozemyne?"

"Right. Wilfried worked hard to get used to moving all that mana every day."

"I see. I'm very proud of you both. I couldn't ask for better children," Florencia said, stepping forward with a kind smile on her face. It seemed that they needed to leave the room quickly, since the scholars would soon be coming in behind them.

I left Florencia with Wilfried, who had a bunch he wanted to tell her, and

instead went over to Karstedt. He was rotating his arm in an attempt to stretch his shoulder.

“Welcome home, Father.”

His eyes widened in surprise for a moment, then crinkled in a soft smile as he looked down at me. “It’s good to see you well, Rozemyne. How have things been?”

But before I could even respond, Sylvester poked my cheek out of nowhere. He looked exhausted—his eyes were hollow, and his face had a ghastly pallor to it.

“I-Is something the matter, Sylvester?” I asked with a tilt of my head.

His expression went unchanged, and he continued poking my cheek with his dead fish-like eyes until I eventually figured out what he wanted.

“...P-Pooey?”

“This is all your fault,” he said. He stopped poking my cheek at that point, but I still had no idea what was going on. What did he want from me? I looked up, blinking in bemusement, when he abruptly flicked my forehead with his pointer finger.

“Ow!”

“We need to talk about the temple. Come to my office at fifth bell.”

“...Okay.”

I rubbed my stinging forehead as I said my goodbyes, then left with Wilfried to return to our lessons. We continued studying until fifth bell, which rang while I was partway through reading.

“You’re going to see Father, Rozemyne? I’ll be drinking tea with Mother and our younger siblings,” Wilfried replied, seeming overjoyed at finally getting to spend time with his parents again. He packed his things away almost immediately after the bell rang and dashed out the room to the main building.

I had business with Sylvester, so I climbed into my Pandabus and headed to his office. Almost everyone was used to seeing Lessy by now, so barely anyone gave me any shocked glances as he pattered by.

“Aub Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne has arrived,” announced a guard.

“Let her in.”

I entered the room to find attendants preparing tea and scholars sorting through paperwork they had brought back with them. Once I had taken the seat offered to me, Sylvester cleared the room of everyone except Karstedt,

his guard knight.

“Wait elsewhere until I summon you all again. Only Karstedt is to stay.”

“As you wish.”

The scholars stopped working at once, exiting alongside the attendants like a wave receding from the shore.

Only once everyone had gone and their footsteps could no longer be heard did Sylvester let out a slow sigh. He dropped his majestic archduke act almost immediately and plopped his head against the table.

“This is all your fault, Rozemyne.”

I understood this was a side that he only showed to his family, but I still wasn’t really sure how to react. What had I done? What exactly was my fault? I had no idea, and when I looked to Karstedt for help, he simply nodded in support of Sylvester.

“A lot happened,” Karstedt said.

“Um, okay. Sylvester, what was it about the temple that you wished to discuss?”

He raised his head slightly, just enough to look at me without lifting it off the table, and glared at me resentfully with his dark-green eyes. “So you told my older sister about the death of my uncle, huh?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re really going to play dumb?”

“Sorry, but I really don’t.”

Sylvester narrowed his eyes further, as though my words had just confirmed something he suspected. I decided to try to extrapolate what I could from his accusation.

“Well, I know that your uncle is the former High Bishop, but I don’t know who your older sister is. I’ve only ever been told about her in passing. She was married to Florencia’s older brother, the archduke of Frenbeltag to the west, right? Is that who you’re talking about?”

“No. That’s the younger of my older sisters. I’m talking about my *oldest* older sister,” Sylvester replied, waving his hand. “She was married off to Ahrensbach down south.”

“Well, I certainly haven’t heard of her. I don’t even know your exact number of siblings.”

I was so clearly disengaged with this whole discussion that Sylvester found it necessary to pull himself up and start rapping his fingers against

the table in frustration. “My sister said that the new High Bishop informed her. Surely you remember telling her about this last winter.”

“The temple received many letters directed to the old High Bishop, and we replied to them all saying that he had passed on. Maybe one of those was from— Oh, wait, did she send that magic letter?! I wrote a reply after the Dedication Ritual, and it turned straight into a bird and flew away! It really took me by surprise,” I said, recalling the magic letter from way back when.

“That’s it!” Sylvester declared, pointing a sharp finger my way. His face shone with excitement at us finally understanding one another, but it was short-lived; a few seconds later, he slumped his shoulders back down. “Right, right... You don’t know about my older sister. Well, my uncle loved to dote on her, and it turns out they stayed in contact even after she got married. During the entire Archduke Conference, she kept calling me cruel for not telling her about his death for almost a whole year.”

It seemed that Sylvester was so exhausted because his older sister had antagonized him about this during the entire conference. And then it hit me.

“Wait, is this perhaps the much older sister that everyone thought would be the previous archduke’s successor before you were born? She hated that you stole the position from her, and your father had her married to another duchy since he predicted Ehrenfest would know no peace otherwise, right?”

“Yeah. Where’d you learn all that?”

Well, I guess she wasn’t Bezewanst’s secret lover after all. It’s a good thing I didn’t spread any rumors about that; the letters were just a niece complaining to her uncle, not long-distance lovers sending each other romantic messages.

“There were letters about it in a box that Bezewanst kept hidden. They must have been really close to keep in touch even after she moved to another duchy.”

“My older sister takes after my mother in many ways, so she ended up my uncle’s favorite.”

And it seemed that his sister had really given him hell for not disclosing Bezewanst’s death himself, with her instead having to hear the news from the temple. Sylvester was the archduke, so while he likely had his reasons for keeping silent given that crimes were involved, he still hadn’t done what was expected of him. As far as I was concerned, he was hardly in a position

to complain about her being bitter.

"Anyway, point being—she'll be coming at the end of summer to visit my uncle's grave. She also said that she wanted to meet and thank you for informing her about his death."

"Okay. It's nice that she'd go through the effort to thank me like that. She must be a genuine, earnest woman."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Sylvester replied, shaking his head. "If she figures out that you're the reason my uncle got caught in the first place, you'll never hear the end of it. She'll antagonize you so relentlessly that her words'll be like daggers piercing through your heart. I'm going to keep as quiet as I can about the details surrounding Bezewanst's arrest, but my sister's own information network in Ehrenfest is still alive and well. All it'll take is one noble telling her the truth and you'll be stuck suffering alongside me."

"Bwuh?!"

"Just consider yourself lucky she can't stay here forever. My sister holds a mean grudge. Wrong her once and she'll never let you forget it."

It turned out that she wasn't a kind person at all. In fact, she was quite the opposite—hateful and apparently a pain to deal with. The blood drained from my face as I thought about having to put up with her too, which made Sylvester give a nasty grin. Misery loves company, and now I would need to endure the torment with him.

"Ahrensbach, the duchy my sister was married off to, ranks higher than Ehrenfest, so ticking her off could cause diplomatic problems. Be careful not to make this an even bigger mess than it already is."

Nooooo... This has turned into such a big deal somehow.

I slumped my shoulders in despair and stood up, assuming that this was the end of our conversation. But Sylvester gestured for me to sit back down.

"We're not done yet. I want to use this year's Starbind Ceremony to bring Ferdinand back into noble society. What're your thoughts on this as the High Bishop?"

"Well, I think it's a good idea if you want the temple to collapse overnight," I replied honestly, causing Karstedt to burst out laughing.

Sylvester, in contrast, cradled his head. "That's not what I meant. You've been the High Bishop for a year now, so you know that the Central District has seen an increase in its harvest. Right now, the entire duchy

lacks mana, which means both citizens and nobles alike want to see those with archduke blood running through their veins working for the sake of the duchy."

That sounded like nothing more than a convenient excuse to me, but I nodded in agreement anyway.

"Not to mention it's been a year since Mother was arrested; there's no longer anyone who would complain about Ferdinand coming back from the temple. I'm thinking about having him return to noble society, then formally assigning him to the position of High Priest, similarly to what I did with you."

It was a move with solid political justification, and I had no complaints so long as Ferdinand would be continuing his work as High Priest. But I glared at Sylvester anyway.

"You just want to do that so you can work Ferdinand to the bone in the castle as well, don't you? I would be quite unhappy with you stealing away his time right now. He hasn't finished raising his successors yet."

Nobody had mentioned returning Ferdinand to noble society when Veronica was arrested, so it seemed to me that this was only coming up now because I had gotten him to focus on his work in the temple, rather than frequenting the castle to help there.

Sylvester faltered at my distrustful accusation. "It's certainly true that there aren't many members of the archducal family who can work in the castle right now, and his help would be much appreciated."

"Sylvester..."

"*But*, more importantly, I don't want to leave Ferdinand as he is now." Sylvester lowered his eyes. "Do you know *why* Ferdinand is in the temple?" he asked quietly.

I had heard scraps of information from Elvira, Karstedt, Bezewanst, and Ferdinand himself, but nobody had given me the exact details.

"Based on what I've been told, I'd say that you sent him there to protect him from your antagonizing mother. But I don't know much more than that."

"That's good guesswork," Sylvester replied, nodding with a bitter frown. It was at this point that Karstedt filled me in a little more.

"Veronica was always harsh on Ferdinand, but toward the end of the former archduke's lifespan, her malice for him became so great that it put

his very life at risk. She was convinced that he wished for the archduke's death and was aiming to secure the position for himself."

Talk about being delusional. Why would Ferdinand ever want such a tedious job when he'd spent his entire life being told not only to live for the archduke's sake, but that useless people had no reason to be alive? Especially when this mindset was so deeply ingrained into him that he refused to show any signs of weakness at all, forcing himself to drink potions just to keep going.

"Ferdinand is the son of a mistress, not a proper wife, and since Mother refused to adopt him, he legally couldn't become the archduke. The position would only go to him if every other member of the archducal family died. Mother knew that, but even so, she antagonized him more with each passing day, becoming crueler and crueler before our eyes. This didn't change even after Father died and I became the archduke. I told Ferdinand to flee to the temple just to get him away from her."

It seemed there had been a period of unrest after Sylvester took the position, and he didn't want there to be any overt problems right away. His assumption had been that, once he was settled in as the archduke, his mother's persecution complex would calm down. But instead, she began ferociously opposing any attempt to get Ferdinand back to the castle.

"I never intended for Ferdinand to stay in the temple as long as he has," Sylvester concluded.

"...I understand where you're coming from, but right now, Ferdinand is having the time of his life raising his successors, and he uses far fewer potions than he used to. His health is improving dramatically, and I don't believe changing his environment would be for the best right now," I replied. All my progress would be undone if Sylvester started working him to death in the castle again.

Karstedt chuckled to himself as I resisted giving up Ferdinand. "When you put it like that, it's hard to tell which of you is the guardian here."

"Yep. It almost sounds like she's his mother," Sylvester smirked, before quickly hiding his mouth behind his hand and glaring at me. "Rozemyne, even looking at this from the angle of Ferdinand being your guardian in the temple, it'd be better for him to return to noble society. Not to mention once he's assigned to the position of High Priest as my brother rather than as a blue priest, he'll be able to visit the temple with scholars and his guard

knight retainers, just like you. Won't that make his work there even easier?"

Among Ferdinand's retainers were Eckhart and Justus. I could remember Eckhart bemoaning his inability to serve as his guard in the temple, given that Ferdinand had moved there of his own volition rather than being assigned there like I had been.

"I'll discuss this with Ferdinand, but ultimately, I think his opinion should take priority here," I said firmly.

"...Right."

With the conversation now actually over, I exited the room. The castle was brimming with life, full of scholars busily moving around due to the return of everyone the archducal couple had brought with them to the Archduke Conference. And with them back, my job here was done; I could return to the temple without spending my days worrying about performing Mana Replenishment. The spring coming of age ceremony was fast approaching, and from there, summer baptism would be right around the corner.

The next day, I visited Ferdinand after returning to the temple. We naturally entered his hidden room to discuss this matter, so as to not send the other priests into a panic.

I could tell that Ferdinand now had much more time on his hands, given that there were rows of vials containing strange liquids on his desk and research papers spread out all over the place. It seemed he was making good progress on researching magic tools, a subject of great interest to him.

After moving aside some documents, I sat on the same bench I always did. Ferdinand took out his chair and sat down as well, and once we made eye contact, he prompted me to begin.

"What did you and Sylvester discuss?"

"It seems he would like to return you to noble society," I began, going on to give him the gist of what Sylvester and I had spoken about.

Ferdinand sighed. "Is he still torn up over that? What a pain."

"I think he's right, though. There are a lot of advantages to doing this."

"And many detriments that I am sure he deemed it best not to mention," Ferdinand said with a bitter smile before furrowing his brow a little and tapping his temple. I could imagine that most people in the temple would be overjoyed at the opportunity to return to noble society, but Ferdinand

seemed to find this more of an inconvenience than anything else.

Sensing his unwillingness, I clenched my fists in determination. “What do *you* want to do? If you’d rather stay here, I’ll tell Sylvester not to bother.”

“There is no need for that. You stand only to gain from this so long as I secure a promise that my position as High Priest will not change, and you should consider it wise not to protest the decisions of an archduke unless the situation truly demands it. Furthermore, as Sylvester said, I will be better served by having more men to aid me. And perhaps most importantly of all, Eckhart and Justus are earning what is rather pointless ire for remaining by my side, and returning to noble society would restore their honor.”

I couldn’t find it in myself to interrupt Ferdinand as he dryly listed off every benefit to his return. When he was done, I pursed my lips and glared at him; he was speaking entirely as though this didn’t concern him. Who cared how much it benefited Eckhart, Justus, or me? This was *his* life we were talking about here.

“I’m not asking how your return will serve others. I’m asking what *you* want to do, Ferdinand.”

He widened his eyes as if stunned by my words, blinked a few times, then slowly shook his head. “Regardless of whether or not I return to noble society, I will be called to the castle to help with paperwork. Thus, it is best for me to choose whichever option provides the most benefits to everyone else.”

I was asking to hear what he wanted to do, not what he thought the best course of action was, but it was hard to imagine Ferdinand budging here. If he was set on making the decision that brought the most overall advantages, then I would just have to respect that.

“It seems that Sylvester will announce your return to the nobles gathered for the Starbind Ceremony. You’ll return to noble society, be reassigned to the position of High Priest at his orders, and then formally become my guardian,” I said.

Ferdinand nodded along with my explanation, but when I mentioned him becoming my guardian, he raised an eyebrow and gave an amused smirk. “Your guardian, hm...? Perhaps I spoke too soon.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that? Is being my guardian such a

huge detriment that it outweighs all those benefits you were talking about?" I asked, shooting him a steely glare.

Ferdinand scoffed, his golden eyes narrowing in amusement. "That is exactly correct—you do nothing but introduce unpredictable problem after unpredictable problem. Serving as Sylvester's aide is already equally as difficult as being your guardian."

As much as it annoyed me, I really couldn't argue with that.

...Still, to think Ferdinand considers me as much of a troublemaker as Sylvester. This is the first time I'm hearing about this. I'm kinda offended that he thinks I'm on the same level as someone who pokes peoples' cheeks at random to make them say "pooey."

The Dress Debut and Ferdinand's Return

Upon returning to the temple, I was faced with a barrage of extremely busy days. I needed to prepare printed goods for the next round of sales in the castle, arrange the time and place for said sales, look over Brigitte's completed outfit, and check up on Hasse.

As the Starbind Ceremony approached, the temple internally prepared for the ceremony that would signal Ferdinand's return to noble society, and word was spread that he would promptly return as the High Priest once it was over. In the final few days leading up to the event, the doors to the High Priest's chambers were kept closed and entry was forbidden; Ferdinand no longer had a place in the temple now that he was being called back, so he was going to be staying in the Noble's Quarter for the time being.

"Kampfer, Frietack—I expect you to continue preparations for the Starbind Ceremony as instructed," Ferdinand said.

"As you wish."

"Rozemyne, perform the ceremonies as you have been, regardless of my absence. You need only do the same as last year, so I cannot imagine there will be any problems. But do not get careless. Understood?"

Only after listing off a long string of warnings that made his unease more than apparent did Ferdinand leave the temple for the Noble's Quarter. I would have to perform this year's Starbind Ceremony without him. Kampfer and Frietack were entrusted with his duties while he was gone, and I could sense how anxious they were about it already.

"Don't worry, you two. All you need to do is read the stories straight from the bible. There's nothing to be anxious about," I said reassuringly.

"High Bishop, we are not worried about speaking of the gods during the ritual. We are worried that Brother Egmont and the other blue priests will not follow our instructions."

Egmont and the former High Bishop's other lackeys were all from high-status families—that is, families that were of a higher status than Kampfer's and Frietack's. In this regard, it would be tough for the two of them to deal with noncompliance issues.

"If anything of the sort happens, please inform me at once. I shall deal with them using my authority as High Bishop."

"It pains us to rely on someone as young as yourself, but your assistance will be much appreciated," they both agreed with gentle smiles.

If the blue priests wanted to use status as an excuse to slack off, then I simply had to crush that excuse with my own hammer of authority. And if that wasn't enough, a little *actual* Crushing would no doubt silence any further opposition. Keeping them under control wouldn't be an issue at all.

"The Starbind Ceremony is called the Star Festival in the lower city, right? Hugo told me all about it," Nicola said while dressing me in my ceremonial robes.

I nodded. "That's right. After the ceremony in the temple, everyone across the city throws taue fruit at one another. I imagine the children in the orphanage are going to be heading off very soon to pick up some for themselves, and I believe Gunther is going along with them."

Lutz had said that he wouldn't be able to accompany the orphans today. The newly established Plantin Company really had to put in work during the Star Festival to get recognition in the area, so Benno had told him to mingle with the lehanges and the stores they came from. The life of a merchant was not an easy one.

"Hugo won't get to participate in the Star Festival's main event this year either, given that his partner broke up with him. Ella told me all about it. But since he's so busy preparing to move to the Noble's Quarter and work as a helper in the castle's kitchen, he isn't upset about it at all. Well, that's what he said, at least—he had a really frustrated look on his face when he told me," Nicola said with a laugh.

Both of my personal chefs were busy today, since they would be heading to the Noble's Quarter right after lunch.

"I'm relying on you to make dinner, Nicola."

"You can count on me. I've grown a lot, too."

There would be one ceremony in the temple this morning, then another

in the castle during the afternoon. This year was especially busy because this second ceremony was where we would be debuting Brigitte's dress.

"Brigitte must be extremely busy right now..." Damuel mused aloud as he rode to the castle in Lessy with my other personnel.

He was sitting in the passenger's seat since Brigitte wasn't here; she had today off and had spent the entire morning preparing for the debut. She would normally get changed in the knight dorms, but as she was going to be wearing a dress I had designed myself, she was being dressed in the castle instead.

"I'm sure she's really anxious, too, especially since she has Lady Elvira accompanying her while you're busy at the temple. That'd be like me spending all morning with the knight commander," Damuel continued, placing an uneasy hand on his stomach as though he was feeling Brigitte's pain firsthand.

Since Damuel had to participate in the Starbind Ceremony as well, he headed straight to the knight dorms once we arrived at the castle. During my time here, my guard knights would be two minors—Cornelius and Angelica.

"Time to get you ready, milady," Rihyarda said.

"Rosina advised Monika and Nicola as to what hairstyles are popular in the castle, so unlike last year, I don't believe much additional preparation will be needed. What do you think, Rihyarda?"

She looked me over from head to toe with narrowed eyes, examining me from every angle. Then, after adjusting my robes at the hip ever so slightly, she gave a nod. "That should just about do it. Now, let's get you to the room where Brigitte's waiting. I believe she's almost ready."

By the time we arrived, Brigitte was already surrounded by Corinna and several seamstresses, all of whom were busily moving about beneath Elvira's watchful eye.

"Mother, I thank you ever so much for agreeing to my request. I appreciate you looking over Brigitte today."

"Of course, Rozemyne. You may entrust the dress's debut to me and focus on your duties as High Bishop."

I was attending the Starbind Ceremony solely to perform my duties as High Bishop: since I was a minor, I had to leave once they were over. To

that end, Elvira would also be accompanying Brigitte to ensure the debut went smoothly, a job she had accepted with glee due to the high praise the dress received during its initial unveiling.

The reality was that Elvira had been unhappy about having nothing to do, since neither Eckhart nor Lamprecht were looking for partners this year. They had both ended up personally thanking me for drawing her attention away from them.

“It looks wonderful on you, Brigitte.”

“Thank you, Lady Rozemyne.”

The halter dress hugged her upper body, making her chest down to her waist look as beautiful as can be. Its light emerald-green fabric did an excellent job emphasizing both her dark-red hair and the similarly colored flower decorations adorning her skirt, while the hair ornament she wore sported pure-white flowers and bouncing leaves that matched her dress. The ornament used a long hair stick similar to the ones I wore so that anyone could immediately identify she had my personal support.

“The beauty of the dress alone would be enough to garner interest, but it was none other than Rozemyne herself who designed it. I imagine that many ambitious men with a lust for power will approach you for political means, Brigitte, so please take care,” Elvira warned. But Brigitte shook her head with a defeated smile.

“I am a woman who canceled an engagement; prior to this, I had given up all hope of ever finding another partner. Should Lady Rozemyne’s dress attract a man who will bring good fortune to Illgner, then there is nothing more I could ask for.”

I mean... I’m more concerned about them being good for you than for Illgner, I thought, but since I didn’t understand the exact impact of canceling an engagement in noble society, there wasn’t much I could say.

“A man who is good for Illgner, hm?” Elvira wondered aloud. “That may still prove rather difficult. Your connection to Rozemyne is clear to all, and if your province does not appeal to others...”

It seemed to me that starting a new paper-making business in Illgner would make it easier for Brigitte to find a good marriage partner. *I’ll do my best with the negotiations, for both her sake and mine.*

“Now then, we must depart for the grand hall. Rozemyne, please return to your room for now,” Elvira said before leaving with the fully prepared

Brigitte.

“I’ll be watching from the stage,” I called out, causing Brigitte to return a small, embarrassed smile.

Once the door was closed, I turned to Corinna, who was busy cleaning up. “Thank you for all your work here, Corinna. The efforts of you and your seamstresses have helped Brigitte to blossom into the beautiful woman she deserves to be. I am certain that her new dress will draw the attention of all those present tonight, and the Gilberta Company’s name will surely spread like wildfire.”

“We are grateful beyond words for your patronage,” Corinna said as she knelt down. The other seamstresses followed suit as well.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must attend to other matters. Ottilie, I trust you to handle the rest.”

“As you wish, Lady Rozemyne.”

Now that I could use my highbeast inside the castle, I arrived at the grand hall right on time, without having to be rushed along by Rihyarda like last year. I speedily put away my Pandabus, and after having Rihyarda check my clothes for wrinkles, stepped into the hall.

“The High Bishop has arrived,” intoned a speaker.

The ceiling of the grand hall reached as high as that of a gymnasium, and stretching down the center of the room from the entrance to the stage was a black, gold-hemmed carpet. I started to walk along it, with everyone’s eyes watching me just as they had the year before.

Had I gotten any faster? No.

“This way, Rozemyne.”

On stage were Sylvester, Florencia, and Karstedt, with several other guard knights standing behind the archducal couple. I took a seat beside Sylvester just as I had done last year, prompting Cornelius and Angelica to stand behind me.

“You sure made one heck of a dress, huh? That knight hardly even looks like the same woman as last year,” Sylvester said in an impressed tone while looking down at Brigitte. She was currently in one corner of the hall, surrounded not only by men, but also women interested in her new outfit.

“Eheh. My guard knight sure is a beauty, isn’t she?”

“Yup. She’ll receive more marriage proposals than she’ll know what to do with,” Sylvester responded with a nod. He had been fairly harsh on

Brigitte last year, but now he was giving her full marks.

It seemed to me that he was exclusively staring at her pronounced bust, but I was kind enough not to point that out; I didn't want to say anything that might harm his reputation in Florencia's eyes.

"That said, she's basically advertising that she has your full support here. She's going to be hounded by ambitious men who lust for power. You better warn her to be careful."

"My mother already did, but Brigitte simply responded that she didn't mind so long as she could secure a good partner to help Illgner. She had given up on marrying anyone of worth due to having canceled her previous engagement. I do hope she can find a good husband, but..." I trailed off, pursing my lips unhappily.

Sylvester raised an eyebrow. "Hm. Hard to say what kind of marriage the world has in store for her, but whether it's good or not will depend on Giebe Illgner. Hopefully they don't draw another dud."

"Well, I won't consider myself responsible if they do. I'll trust Brigitte and Giebe Illgner to make the right decision here," I replied. I didn't know what kind of person would be good for Illgner, nor what Brigitte wanted in a marriage. "I'm just pleased that everyone now understands Brigitte is a beautiful and charming woman. I also hope that it becomes fashionable for women to wear clothes that suit them, rather than them being restricted to whatever's trendy."

"So you were thinking about more than just starting a new trend here, huh...?" Sylvester asked, his eyes widening a little in surprise. But my ambitions here weren't that lofty; I just wanted people to be free to wear clothes that looked good on them.

All of a sudden, I heard the high-pitched squeals of many fine noblewomen rise above the chatter. I looked over to see what all the fuss was about, and realized that Ferdinand had entered the hall. Women thronged the door to catch even a passing glimpse, though they didn't dream of standing in his way. Everyone kept clear of the gold-hemmed carpet as though they had agreed to do so ahead of time.

"There you are, Ferdinand," Sylvester called out.

Ferdinand reached the stage with no obstructions, climbed up the steps, and sat next to me on the opposite side from Sylvester. Behind him stood Eckhart, who was unable to hide the smile on his face; being able to serve

as Ferdinand's guard knight apparently brought him more joy than searching for a new wife.

"You seem happy about this, Eckhart."

"Indeed. I had thought the day where I could once again serve Lord Ferdinand might never come. Justus is just as glad as I am."

"Quite. He even said that he would now like to visit the temple as much as possible. Though it seemed to me that his eyes fell on someone other than myself," Ferdinand added, shooting me a weighty glance.

"...Are you inferring that Justus wants to visit the temple to see *me*?"

"An outright answer may lead to unwelcome rumors about his romantic proclivities, but considering his obsession with collecting information, there is no mistaking that you are a source of great interest to him," Ferdinand replied, confirming my suspicion despite having in the same sentence expressed his desire not to.

It turned out that Justus found me and my antics to be both surprising and intriguing to no end.

"Take care not to mention this carelessly," Ferdinand repeated, making sure I understood.

"Right. By the way, your return to noble society means you can get married again, right? Shouldn't you be down there looking for someone?" I asked. It seemed to me that, rather than sitting up on the stage, he should be with the other available men calling out to a fine noblewoman or two.

But Ferdinand glanced down at the hall dismissively. "There would be no point; not a single woman there has enough mana to match my own."

His flat response took me by surprise. I was already aware from the situation between Brigitte and Damuel that a considerable difference in mana capacity was enough to kill any chance of a relationship, but was he really saying that every single woman of marriageable age in the hall didn't have enough mana for him?

"Um... Not a single one?"

"Not among the unmarried women of Ehrenfest, no."

"Wait, really? But haven't you courted a girl before? Mother mentioned that it didn't last long, but..."

It was hard to imagine there being any mistakes in the deep Ferdinand lore that I'd heard from Elvira, especially considering that it largely originated from Eckhart, who had witnessed it all happen firsthand. I shot

him a quick glance, which was enough for Ferdinand to deduce the true source of my information.

“What in the world have you all been wasting your time talking about?” he asked with a grimace. “Good grief... Either way, that happened when I was attending the Royal Academy. There were girls taking the archduke candidate course alongside me whose mana capacity was large enough to match my own. And to be clear, if we included *married* women in Ehrenfest, then there would be one who is compatible.”

I was relieved to know that the number of women wasn’t literally zero, but I also couldn’t help but wonder. *Considering this is purely about mana, would that married woman he’s referring to be Florencia? I guess not even Ehrenfest’s archnobles have a large enough capacity for Ferdinand.*

“It must be rough only being compatible with members of the archducal family,” I said.

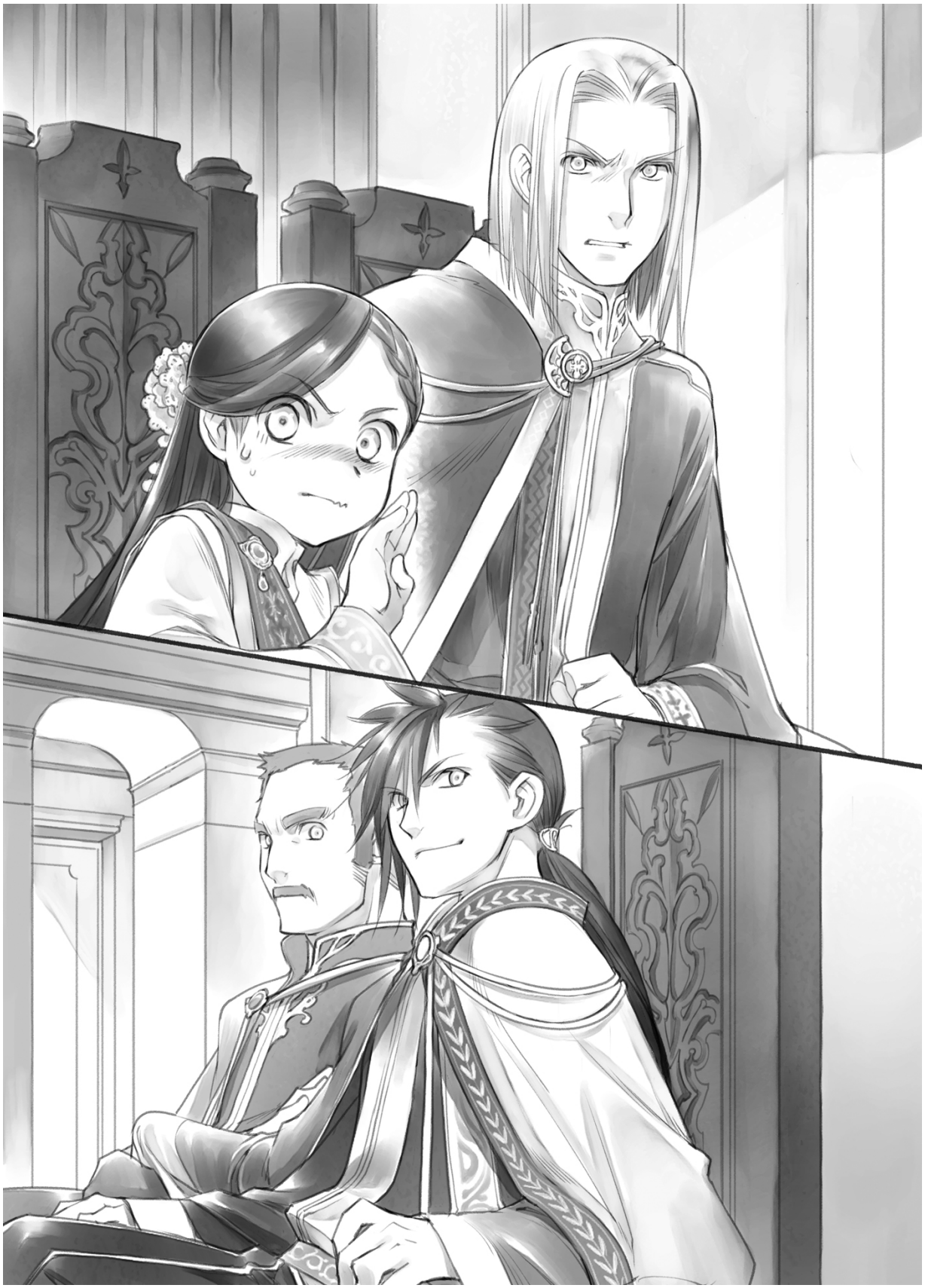
Upon hearing me speak about the matter as though it didn’t concern me whatsoever, Karstedt gave a bemused frown. “In that case, Ferdinand, perhaps you should marry Rozemyne. Her mana capacity will equal yours once she’s grown, correct?”

His abrupt suggestion caused both Ferdinand and me to grimace with wide-eyed horror.

“You would have me look after this problem child for my entire life? Just how much do you wish for me to suffer, Karstedt?”

“Ferdinand is exactly right. Being stuck with a perpetually unhappy lecture factory like him would be nothing but torment for me. Would you ever want to marry him, Father? Even knowing how talented he is? I didn’t think so.”

“Heh. You two sure are peas in a pod, huh?” Sylvester chimed in, his lips curling into an especially smug smirk. My cheeks started to twitch with frustration; he always made that face when he was causing problems for other people.



“Sylvester...” I began, planning to say that he should drop the idea before I dropped him. But Ferdinand stopped me before I could.

“All that will achieve is amusing him further,” he said.

It made perfect sense. We couldn’t let ourselves react the way Sylvester wanted us to. I nodded in agreement, at which point Ferdinand placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me a serious look.

“Rozemyne, you will find more nobles with a mana capacity equivalent to yours in the Royal Academy than anywhere else. Use that time to find the best partner you can. I do not mind if doing so requires you to leave Ehrenfest. You have my express permission—hide your true self, and do everything in your power to find a partner. Understand?”

“I will put in the effort to find someone with a larger book collection than anyone in Ehrenfest. But really, you’re the one who should be putting in the work here, Ferdinand. You’re approaching a more dire age for this than I am.”

As we advanced the conversation along on our own, Sylvester hurriedly leaned forward to stop us. “Hold it, you two. Those are some serious political decisions you’re trying to make. Ferdinand, you don’t have the authority to give her permission for that.”

“Think again, Sylvester. Have you forgotten that I am soon to be her guardian?”

“My my, Sylvester. And a guardian is much like a parent, are they not?” I asked, both Ferdinand and I sharing the same subtle, victorious smile.

Sylvester fell silent, completely aghast. That would probably be enough to stop him from butting in again.

Satisfied with the counterattack we had landed, I began scanning the hall for Damuel, just as I had done last year. But once again, I couldn’t find him. Perhaps he had finally found a cute girlfriend. Or maybe he was too lovestruck with Brigitte to even search for one.

At seventh bell, Sylvester smoothly stood up from his chair and took a step forward, his cape rippling behind him. “Now begins the Starbind Ceremony. Newlyweds, come forth!”

Once the newlyweds in the hall were lined up, Sylvester gave his speech. The couples then signed their marriage contracts, one pair at a time, and when those were all done, I gave them a blessing.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O God of Darkness and

Goddess of Light, hear my prayers. May you grant your blessings to the birth of new unions. May they who offer their prayers and gratitude to thee be blessed with thy divine protection."

I prayed to the King and Queen gods while pouring mana into my ring, causing black and golden lights to swirl around before shooting up to the ceiling. The lights merged together, overlapped, and then exploded. Tiny specks of glistening dust scattered throughout the room, raining down on the newlyweds to the cheers of the audience.

Whew. My work here is done.

The announcement of Ferdinand's return to noble society was apparently happening next, but I had to leave as soon as my blessing was given. I would have to wait and hear the details from Elvira during our tea party planned for tomorrow afternoon.

"Mother, how was the reception for Brigitte's dress?" I asked. I made sure to take the first sip of tea and try one of the prepared sweets before gesturing for her to do the same.

Elvira gently raised her own teacup to her lips, letting out a wistful sigh with a blissful look on her face. "Last night she was simply... *aah*... simply wonderful," she began, her eyes sparkling like those of a young girl with radiant dreams.

What followed wasn't a discussion on how the dress was received, however, but a love story starring Brigitte. She had spent the previous year's ceremony clad in clothes that didn't suit her, but this year, she wore a new outfit so stunning that she attracted the attention of all those present.

The dress had of course been designed by the archduke's adopted daughter, and as men found themselves drawn to both Brigitte's beauty and her powerful political sponsor, one man stepped forward from the crowd with a smile—the very same man she had previously ended her engagement with.

"I am willing to offer you another chance. Getting engaged to me again will repair your reputation more than any other marriage could," he said brazenly, extending a hand for her to take.

But then Damuel stepped forth with several fellow knights, getting between Brigitte and her former fiancé in an attempt to protect her honor.

"Damuel knelt before Brigitte and declared: 'Wait one year for me, and I

shall have developed enough mana to earn your hand in marriage.’ It was like watching a knight story develop before our very eyes, and even observing from the sidelines was enough to make my heart pound with emotion. If only a man would pine for my love with such fervor...” Elvira concluded with a breathy sigh.

...What the heck?! I can’t believe I missed that!

Lunch Meeting and Business Day

It was two days after the Starbind Ceremony, and the book sale was being held this afternoon. Word had spread during the ceremony, resulting in more nobles staying behind in the Noble's Quarter than last year, but this also meant there was plenty of time for rumors surrounding Damuel's proposal to circulate through the castle. Now all sorts of people were teasing him.

Women were fairly fond of the event, since it had been like watching a storybook romance unfold before their very eyes, but men thought it impossible for a laynoble like Damuel to get enough mana to match a mednoble like Brigitte. They were mocking him for clinging so hard to doomed love, but even then, they did praise him for defending her honor from her ex-fiancé. On occasion, I even saw some slap him on the back and say, "Can't wait to see what happens next year," with broad grins on their faces.

Brigitte herself was saying that, regardless of whether or not Damuel managed to build up enough mana over the next year, she was grateful for him protecting her honor. The look on her face made it clear that she thought he would never actually achieve his impromptu promise, and that it had been made only to protect her in the moment.

"Just one year... Damuel, do you believe you will make it?" I asked. Everyone's mana capacity increased at a different rate, and while I had taught him my compression method, I wasn't sure how helpful it would ultimately be. In fact, I didn't even know how big the difference was between him and Brigitte.

"I don't know, but... I'm just glad to have more time," Damuel replied, his resolve steeled now that he had given himself a deadline. His firm expression was pretty cool compared to his usual—let's face it—lame demeanor.

On this busy sales day, I was also having a lunchtime meeting with Giebe Illgner. He had asked for some of my time to thank me for the dress I

made Brigitte, which was perfect timing for me; I already wanted to discuss my trip to Illgner and introduce him to the Plantin Company, so scheduling on the same day as the book sale was more than convenient.

"Ferdinand, Giebe Illgner—it is a pleasure to see you both today," I said as I entered the dining room. Now that Ferdinand was officially my guardian, he was participating in meetings related to the printing industry to ensure I didn't cause any bizarre problems or get dominated in conversation by other nobles.

As my adoptive father, Sylvester was my primary guardian, but the archduke obviously didn't have the time to attend every meeting I was involved in. My secondary guardian was Karstedt—my actual father, as it were—but since he was the archduke's guard knight, he couldn't attend every meeting either. That left Ferdinand as the only man for the job, and you'd better believe he was already grumbling about how he should never have rejoined noble society in the first place.

Well, you have my sympathy, Ferdinand.

After exchanging our long noble greetings, lunch was served. I naturally took the first bite, allowing Ferdinand and Giebe Illgner to pick up their cutlery as well.

No sooner had Giebe Illgner taken a bite himself than a heartfelt smile spread across his face. "I was shocked by the delicious flavors of your recipes when I first enjoyed them last winter, Lady Rozemyne. Brigitte often brags about getting to eat your food, so I have been eagerly awaiting this lunch meeting."

Brigitte shot him a stern glare, her cheeks tinged red with embarrassment at her secrets being revealed. Giebe Illgner smiled back at her before getting straight to the point.

"Lady Rozemyne, I am grateful beyond words for you gifting my little sister a new fashion of dress for this Starbind Ceremony. Your kindness has restored her honor and given her new hope for marriage," he continued, glancing over at Damuel. From the subtle mirth in his grin, I could guess that he had witnessed the famed proposal firsthand.

With that, I also glanced toward Damuel, who was standing behind me as my guard knight. "I exited as soon as I completed my blessing and was thus regrettably unable to see the proposal. What happened, exactly?" I asked, prompting Giebe Illgner to elaborate.

He went on to tell me what happened from his perspective as Brigitte's brother, making it sound a lot more like a hero striking down a villain than a love story. It was pretty entertaining to hear how much his narration differed from Elvira's interpretation of events.

Once he had finished, lunch came to an end.

"I know not whether this is enough to repay you, Lady Rozemyne, but Illgner is ready for your visit at any time. We would like to prepare as much wood from as many trees as possible for your sake," Giebe Illgner said as we sipped our post-meal tea. I was going to pounce on the opportunity, but Ferdinand raised a hand to stop me.

"Rozemyne, be aware that Giebe Illgner intends to use your visit to show Brigitte's former fiancé that they have your full support, thereby discouraging him from causing any further problems. Please keep this in mind as you respond. There is a considerable chance of you becoming embroiled in their conflict," Ferdinand explained, quietly eyeing him. But I had been fully prepared to back up Brigitte from the moment I designed that dress; I didn't have any problem with Giebe Illgner exploiting my interest to benefit his province.

"As I, too, do not wish for Brigitte to marry anyone who would cause her harm, I have no qualms with my influence being used to intimidate her former fiancé. Being able to research plant paper in Illgner is of great use to me, and I do not mind assisting Illgner in turn."

Giebe Illgner wanted my political support, and I wanted Illgner's wood and hospitality for research purposes. We both served to benefit from this operation, which meant I could send the Plantin Company there without any worries.

"Research plant paper, you say?" Giebe Illgner asked.

"Indeed. Paper is an essential component in printing. I must establish plant paper workshops before I can spread the printing industry throughout Ehrenfest."

"And you will be entrusting that to Illgner...?" he asked, blinking in disbelief. I was offering him an opportunity to join the duchy's new business from the very start; there would be no better way to show other nobles that he had my support. And meanwhile, I would be able to research plant paper to my heart's content.

"I shall of course share with you how to create plant paper as research

on new varieties progresses within Illgner. You will be able to invest in the printing industry before any other province with forestry.”

“I thank you,” Giebe Illgner said, his expression softening as he realized my support here was genuine. I smiled back at him, but capitalizing on this opportunity wouldn’t be trivial—paper-making took work.

“Giebe Illgner, I will have you support merchants of the Plantin Company as they establish workshops and conduct research in your province. You have buildings for housing priests during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, correct? Assuming those are ready and supplied, we can begin at once.”

“At once, you say?” Giebe Illgner repeated, surprised.

I nodded with a broad smile. “I have been studying geography as of late, and if my memory serves me correctly, I believe Illgner is one of Ehrenfest’s most southern provinces. Its climate is such that its rivers do not freeze even in winter, and if this is true, you may be able to turn paper-making into winter handiwork.”

“That would be... a very appealing prospect.”

“The Plantin Company will provide more information on how the paper profits are to be distributed. Since shipping costs will presumably be involved, I imagine your workshops will not make exactly the same amount as mine. Ottilie, I believe the Plantin Company should have already arrived at the sales room. Please summon Benno for me.”

The Plantin Company was in another room preparing for the upcoming business discussion, and after a brief wait, Benno arrived alongside a young man whom I didn’t quite recognize.

“Blessed be the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire, who guided us toward this serendipitous meeting. I am Benno of the Plantin Company. It is an honor to meet you.”

“May the Plantin Company be blessed by Leidenschaft the God of Fire,” Giebe Illgner responded, spawning the lights of a blessing which floated to both Benno and his companion.

With the greetings done, I explained to Benno why I had summoned him. There wasn’t a trace of panic in his expression, since I had told him ahead of time that he was very likely going to be called in during my meeting with Giebe Illgner.

Even I’ve *grown a little by now. Eheheh.*

“Benno, I was discussing the paper research with Giebe Illgner. When will the Plantin Company be ready to depart?”

“As soon as you wish, Lady Rozemyne. We have prepared both the tools and the men we need,” Benno replied. I praised the speed and quality of their work before looking over at Giebe Illgner.

“Lady Rozemyne, if we need only open the doors of our buildings for them, then we are ready for you at any time. But may I ask how long they expect to visit? The priests will need the buildings when they arrive for the Harvest Festival, and there is much more we will need to prepare if your merchants intend to stay over the winter.”

“They are due to stay until Illgner’s Harvest Festival. I shall visit and perform the ceremony myself, using the opportunity to hear the results of their research and bring the Plantin Company back along with the workshop workers.”

This approach would preclude any significant problems, and by breaking my pattern of merely performing ceremonies in the Central District, I could make my alliance with Illgner even clearer.

“Ferdinand, please take care to schedule me for Illgner during the Harvest Festival.”

“I shall make it so,” Ferdinand said with a nod, voicing no objections.

“We will depart as soon as my workshop is prepared. Brigitte can inform you of the precise dates by ordonnanz when the time comes.”

“Understood. I will await your arrival,” Giebe Illgner replied. And with that, Benno asked for permission to speak.

“Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne, Giebe Illgner—may I introduce a Plantin Company merchant who will be heading to Illgner?”

“You may.”

“His name is Damian. He is the grandson of Gustav, guildmaster of the Ehrenfest Merchant’s Guild. It is my understanding that he met Lady Rozemyne once several years ago,” he announced.

Damian, who was standing behind him, smoothly crossed his arms and knelt. He had light, chestnut-colored hair and amber eyes, and was about as tall as Benno. The fact that he was remaining calm in the presence of so many nobles despite looking as though he had just come of age a few years ago showed that he was from a rich and powerful family.

His introduction erased all possible doubt that he was Freida’s older

brother, but I couldn’t unsee him as a roughly ten-year-old kid. He hadn’t been this tall back then, nor was he an adult.

“I did meet him once while in the care of Gustav and Freida, but he looks quite different from what I remember.”

“Yes, he went through a growth spurt that changed his appearance entirely in the span of a single year,” Benno explained.

With the introduction finished, I took out my diptych to read out the important details for our stay. “In return for instructions on how to make plant paper, we entrust the preparation of meals to Illgner. We shall instruct one gray priest to help with the cooking each day. Would you care to discuss with Benno the specifics of the plant paper sales and distribution of profit once work in Illgner has begun?”

From there, the conversation proceeded mainly between Illgner and the Plantin Company. I mediated and occasionally proposed amendments to ensure that each side received a fair amount and Benno’s merchant perspective was understood in full.

“Rozemyne, it is almost fifth bell. You must depart for the sales room,” Ferdinand warned, having probably looked at something to determine the time.

Benno and Damian promptly exited the room, after which I said my farewells to Giebe Illgner. His verbose statements could be summarized as: “Do take care of my little sister now that she’s the center of attention.”

When I headed to the sales room, I found that many merchants were there already. I didn’t recognize any of them except Benno and Mark, who were walking around and giving instructions. The others were probably the lehanges sent from other stores; they all moved and spoke with well-trained grace.

I think Lutz might need a little more training in places like this to reach their level...

Preparations for business had mostly been completed, and products were lined up on each table. There were the books on the seven primary gods, the ones on their subordinates representing the different seasons, a selection of the knight short stories not yet bound into a single collection, and the sheet music for six unique songs—all thanks to the hard work of those in the orphanage and Hasse’s workshop. We were also selling karuta, playing cards, and reversi sets that had been made as winter handiwork.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Benno said upon seeing me. He knelt, and the other merchants quickly followed suit.

“No need for any greetings, given that we just saw one another. How are the preparations going? The customers will be arriving soon.”

“We are almost ready. Do you observe anything that is lacking?” he asked. Meanwhile, the merchants swiftly stood up to finish the last of their work. They moved smoothly, and the final touches were steadily completed before my eyes.

“Benno, have you prepared what we discussed earlier?” I asked, shooting a meaningful glance his way.

He grinned and nodded. “Of course.”

Business would begin at fifth bell, but nobles began arriving a little earlier than that to get greetings out of the way. I was of course forced to oblige.

“Lady Rozemyne, thank you ever so much for granting my request. I have yearned for books of each season for so long now,” one noble child said.

I had announced this book sale ahead of time in the winter playroom, so students and their parents were rushing to buy picture books on the subordinate gods of each season. In any case, their greeting washed over me, and I instead used the opportunity to recommend my products.

“According to my guard knight, reading these picture books will make third-year courses significantly easier. I wish you luck in your studies.”

The girl, hugging the picture books on the subordinate gods to her chest, pointed at another product with the silhouette of a man playing the harspiel on the cover. “What is this, might I ask?”

“That is harspiel sheet music,” I replied. “Those with a woman on the cover are practice songs for children, arranged by my personal musician, while those showing a man are songs debuted by Ferdinand during his concert. I believe those who attended will find those songs in particular quite nostalgic.”

The songs written by Rosina were arrangements of school anthems I had sung and played for her. Printing for them was already complete by the time I returned to the temple following the Archduke Conference.

“Oh my. You wrote the songs yourself, Lady Rozemyne?”

“I would not go that far, no. I simply, ah, hummed songs for Ferdinand

and my musician to arrange.”

“That is still quite impressive,” the girl replied, selecting a fairly difficult piece from the selection of children’s practice songs to buy.

A mednoble—or perhaps a laynoble—woman soon came over, her young son eagerly pulling her hand. “He just wants playing cards ever so much. I have heard great things about them during tea parties, so I believe I shall be buying a set now.” She had apparently bought some karuta last winter to help her son learn to read, and now he was dying to have a set of playing cards too.

“They help one learn math, and since victory is rewarded with sweets, everyone is desperate to improve. Perhaps with these you will win next winter,” I said to the boy.

“I’ll study as hard as I can and get the sweets for sure!” he replied with a happy smile, victoriously holding up the playing cards.

Next came a noble on the fairly older side. “Oho, so these are all printed, hm?” he asked while peering down at the cover art of each book with great interest.

“Indeed. These are printed goods—the products of an industry that is soon to become a central pillar of Ehrenfest. You may pick them up and look inside, if you would like.”

Unlike during our sale at the winter playroom, we weren’t prioritizing children this time, so both nobles interested in printing and those attempting to form connections with me were in attendance. The older nobleman flipped through the pages of one book, curious about what printing was, and ultimately bought the text-heavy knight stories.

“Oh my, this is the sheet music for the songs Lord Ferdinand played at his concert? Consider them sold. And... you wouldn’t happen to have any more illustrations like those you sold back then, would you?” another young lady asked in a hushed whisper.

“Unfortunately, I do not,” I responded clearly, before gesturing with a smile for Benno to bring me what we had discussed earlier. “This knight story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental. While these may look familiar, I can assure you they are not who you think they are.”

Mark handed me a file made from thin wooden boards, which I opened in front of the young woman. Inside were the illustrations for the knight

stories. Since you could only see the covers when browsing the lined-up books, I had made this collection of selected art. It very helpfully allowed customers to pick which story to buy based on the illustrations they liked the most, since beneath each one was the title of whatever tale it was based on. I had considered putting them up on the wall like posters, or making stands to hold up the illustrations behind the books, but I was afraid that Ferdinand would notice and forbid their sale entirely, so I was keeping it somewhat secretive for now.

"Lady Rozemyne, might I purchase this collection of illustrations?"

"It is unfortunately not for sale, but the stories certainly are."

After staring at the illustrations to her heart's content, her eyes positively sparkling as she examined the pictures, the young woman bought one of the knight stories. Once the transaction was complete, I handed the file straight back to Mark. The young woman must have immediately gone off and told all her friends about it, as we were soon struck by a wave of young women clamoring to buy copies themselves. They all wanted to see the file, too.

Eheheh. Good! Good! This is what I like to see.

By the time the book sale came to an end, we had sold a ton, with Ferdinand's sheet music ultimately being our best seller. More noble wives and young women than I expected had wanted the songs, particularly since they had only ever been performed once during the concert and were originals that couldn't be heard anywhere else. Some wanted to practice them on their harspiel while reminiscing about the concert, while others wanted to listen to their personal musicians play them. A few men had even purchased the sheet music hoping the songs would help them court women, which was pretty funny to see.

The knight stories sold better with women than men, just as I expected. The most popular one was the tale where the knight defeated a feybeast and offered up its feystone to the princess; his sweet smile as he proposed to her had apparently stolen the heart of all the women who read it.

While the knight may have been modeled on Ferdinand, the Wilma Filter had turned him into an entirely different person. Ferdinand never gave sweet, considerate smiles like that; he gave scary, venomous ones.

"It truly is a shame that you cannot sell the illustrations on their own," Elvira said with a melancholy sigh after having bought every single knight story.

“I share your pain, since they sell better than anything else we have available, but Ferdinand was quite clear when he forbade me from printing them.”

“But the world yearns for them. Is there nothing that can be done?” she asked, glancing my way. But the matter was out of my hands. Out of... *my* hands.

I shot my head up. “Unfortunately, Mother, there is nothing I can do. Nothing *I* can do,” I repeated, placing deliberate emphasis on my words.

Elvira gasped, her eyes beginning to sparkle as she placed a hand on her cheek in sudden realization. “Oh my, of course. Indeed, indeed. There is simply nothing that *you* can do.”

“Unfortunately so. As much as it pains me, my hands are tied.”

It seemed that my intentions were adequately conveyed. I smiled brightly, and Elvira smiled back in turn.

“Rozemyne, it would be right of me to say that Aub Ehrenfest himself wishes for printing to be spread, yes?”

“Of course, Mother. He wishes to spend the coming decade or two spreading it across the entirety of Ehrenfest as an important industry.”

“Then I shall ask my older brother, Giebe Haldenzel, if he would be so kind as to help his beloved niece with her work. Will you assist me in discussing matters with him this winter?”

“Absolutely.”

It was the will of the archduke that printing be spread throughout the duchy, and he would have no qualms with more nobles getting involved with the establishment of additional workshops. And were those new workshops to theoretically begin printing illustrations of Ferdinand, well... that didn’t have anything to do with me.

Elvira and I exchanged conspiratorial grins, her eyes shining as she began plotting out her next moves, starting with finding her own illustrator posthaste.

Heading to Illgner

With the sales day having ended prosperously, I made my way back to the temple while thinking of more ways to stealthily assist Elvira with her scheme. Upon my return, I immediately needed to get to work preparing the squad for their trip to Illgner. I summoned Lutz and Gil to the hidden room in my orphanage director's chambers, asking them to select which gray priests would accompany them and prepare the daily necessities they would need.

"Gil, be careful when choosing clothes, okay? You'll need outfits for both summer and autumn. I think it will be fairly cold when I come to get you during the Harvest Festival."

"Understood."

"Lutz, please have the Gilberta Company prepare several sets of clothes for the gray priests to wear while going out in Illgner. They don't have to be very expensive, but they need something for when they're not working in the workshop. Unlike in the temple, I don't think they'll be able to wear loose clothing there."

"Alright. I'll have that sorted once we've picked who's coming with us."

As I watched them both write things down on their diptychs, I racked my brain for what else they might need.

"Definitely don't forget tableware. I can't imagine they'll have enough for this many people, and since the gray priests have never eaten without cutlery, it would no doubt be a major issue to not have any."

Lutz was used to grabbing food with his hands and sharing cutlery in lower city eateries, but gray priests were raised to serve nobles and actually received relatively fancy upbringings as a result. They would probably freeze up from cultural shock in Illgner, just as Hasse's orphans had struggled to adjust to life in the temple.

"I'll ask Master Benno or Damian to get the silverware and all that. I know we'll be staying in Illgner until the Harvest Festival, but when is that exactly?"

“...Probably after I gather my autumn ingredient. We’ll be doing that on the Night of Schutzaria, when the moon turns purple, so some time after then.”

Lutz had consoled me when I was all weepy about my failure last year. He must have remembered that, as he started scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

“Er... Well, don’t mess up this time.”

“Ngh... It’ll be fine this year. Ferdinand is coming with us.”

Ferdinand had mentioned that he planned to borrow Karstedt, commander of the Knight’s Order, from Sylvester for this year’s Night of Schutzaria. With both him and Eckhart thoroughly planning around the rush of feybeasts we had encountered last year, it was hard to imagine that anything would go *too* wrong.

But before that, we need to gather my summer ingredient.

“Anyway, this is a report from the Plantin Company,” Lutz said. “Damian is going to be visiting your workshop for a bit; he can’t really negotiate with Giebe Illgner if he doesn’t know how to make paper.”

“That’s fine, so long as Benno gave his permission for it. Just remember that, like the craftsmen, he can only go to the workshop. Be sure to very firmly tell Damian that he shouldn’t wander into the noble’s section of the temple.”

“Who do you think he is, another you? Normal people don’t wander into noble territory,” Lutz shot back, his eyes narrowed into a glare.

Damian was the guildmaster’s grandson; doing business with nobles was like breathing to him, so he knew exactly what he should and shouldn’t do around them, even if the work he was doing here was largely for the Plantin Company’s benefit.

“Oh, right. The guildmaster said that he wanted to meet with you before everyone leaves for Illgner. Think you can make time for that?”

“I don’t mind him coming to see everyone off when we leave, but scheduling any time before then won’t be easy. There’s a lot I need to do before going to Illgner. Plus... I feel like he’ll probably try to load some work onto me, even though I’m already busy. I kinda don’t want to see him.”

While I was now of a higher status than the guildmaster, his pushiness really left an impression on me. But as I thought about how wary I still was

about him, Lutz shook his head in exasperation.

“Nah, nah, nah. It’s you nobles who push way too much work onto people, not him.”

Ngh... Sorry for giving you all so much to do... And that things keep getting accelerated.

“Anyway, that’s fine,” Lutz continued. “I’ll tell the guildmaster that he can come to see us off.”

Lutz and Gil selected the four gray priests to join them in Illgner, then brought the paper-making tools they would need to the workshop. Damian was going to be visiting them as well now, but since I rarely went there myself, we never saw one another.

Back in the High Bishop’s chambers, Brigitte sent an ordonnanz to Illgner, seeming a little elated to be conversing with her family, and we settled on a date for our departure.

And so came the morning we were due to leave. All the stuff we needed to bring was piled onto the ivory stone pavement in the temple’s back garden from the lower city side. It was close to the workshop, and sizable enough that I would be able to take out my highbeast.

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Good morning. Is everyone ready?” I asked, looking around at the gray priests and Plantin Company workers helping to move everything in preparation. Among the crowd, I saw that Freida and the guildmaster had already arrived.

“Take a step back, if you would. I am taking out my highbeast,” I continued, before forming Lessy into a coach-sized Pandabus to contain all the luggage I could see. Benno immediately ordered the workers to begin loading things into Lessy, while Freida looked on in a daze.

“Lady Rozemyne... What in the world is that?”

“My highbeast. We’ll be using it to travel to Illgner. Cute, isn’t it?”

Freida looked between Lessy and me several times, then tilted her head. “Highbeast...? This looks very different from any highbeast I know.”

I was used to getting weird looks by now. What surprised me more was that Freida seemed familiar with highbeasts at all; you didn’t really see them outside the Noble’s Quarter that often.

While everyone else was getting ready, Freida and I spoke about how

the Italian restaurant was holding up, and she gave me her outsider perspective on the Plantin Company. She had heard about the book sale in the castle from Damian as well.

“I heard that you’re the one who referred Damian to the Plantin Company, Freida.”

“Indeed, I was. The printing industry began with you, Lady Rozemyne, and is being spread with the archduke’s full support. Is it not an obvious decision to participate in something with such guaranteed success? Please, work my older brother to the bone. He will surely prove useful to you.”

I faltered a little at Freida being as direct and true to her merchant senses as always, at which point Damian slid in between us. “Freida, you may have Lady Rozemyne’s permission to do so, but I suggest you not speak so casually with her. She is not the same as she was prior to her baptism.”

“Ah, do forgive me. I will take more care going forward.”

Damian must have noticed that I was hesitating somewhat. He pulled us apart while warning Freida that she wasn’t acting appropriately toward the archduke’s adopted daughter.

“Get inside once the loading is done,” Benno called out. “Everyone who’s ridden in this thing before, teach those who haven’t how to use the seatbelts.”

The group of people going to Illgner was as follows: Benno, Lutz, and Damian from the Plantin Company; Fran, Gil, Monika, and Hugo from my attendants and personnel; Damuel and Brigitte from my guard knights; and finally, four gray priests from the orphanage.

Brigitte climbed into the front passenger seat, looking happy to be returning home for the first time in a while, whereas Damuel—who would be leading the group on his highbeast—looked rather tense. He was probably planning to leave as good of an impression on her family as possible, which was heartwarming to be sure, but I thought it best that he relax rather than get so tense that he might mess up when the time came.

“Off we go, then,” I said with a wave before flying Lessy up into the air, catching a glimpse of Freida and the guildmaster dropping their jaws as they witnessed the sight.

My Pandabus flew through the sky, taking only a short break for lunch along the way. Illgner was covered with forests and mountains, just as I had heard from Brigitte and learned during my geography lessons. Rivers

flowed from the mountains and into lakes, dotted with various houses along the way.

I eventually saw a broad, ivory mansion in the middle of what was the largest settlement so far. That was Illgner's summer mansion. Several villagers were looking up at the sky and waving to us, as though they had been awaiting our arrival.

"Are they perhaps calling for you, Brigitte?"

"...They all are like family to me," she replied, looking down at Illgner with a nostalgic smile.

Unlike in Ehrenfest, walls didn't separate the noble's mansion from where the commoners lived, and the fact that they were waving and calling out to Brigitte really showed how close commoners and nobles were here.

"I understand this may be unsettling to you, Lady Rozemyne. We, erm... Illgner is quite different from Ehrenfest, so... You may think the commoners are acting out of place, but it is not done out of malice," she explained, worried about the citizens earning my disfavor. Her concerns were likely based on what she knew about the situation in Hasse, but I shook my head.

"You don't need to worry. While I'm sure Ferdinand would be quite displeased with this, I was raised in the temple, often visiting the orphanage and sneaking out into the lower city to meet merchants and craftsmen. Commoners being close to nobles does not offend me whatsoever, especially when they all so clearly admire you, Brigitte. And," I continued in a quiet voice, "did I not eat normally with commoners during Hasse's Harvest Festival?"

Brigitte blinked several times, then broke into a cheerful grin. It was a genuine smile—something that was rare to see from her since she normally kept to herself, maintaining a strict expression and speaking very few words. Honestly, she looked so cute right now that I wanted to brag to Damuel about it.

Once we had all climbed out of Lessy, a dozen or so commoners gathered around us. According to Brigitte, they were the commoners who worked not only in the forest and fields, but as servants in the summer mansion as well.

"Welcome home, Lady Brigitte."

"Thank you for coming, Lady Rozemyne."

The commoners all had warm looks in their eyes, overflowing with love

and respect for Brigitte. She greeted them with an equally warm smile on her face that I almost never saw while she was on duty.

“I’m finally back. Everyone, this is my mistress Lady Rozemyne, the archduke’s adopted daughter. Take care to pay her the proper respect,” she said.

“Ah, so you’re serving a member of the archducal family? We need to be careful then,” an older man said, at which point the other villagers began chiming in one after another.

“Well, well. Seems like our tomboy has grown into one fine lady, huh?”

“Maybe she’s found a lover!”

“She always spent more time running around the mountains with a knife than learning etiquette, but now she’s such a proper woman...”

They were all talking about Brigitte’s past. Naturally, she hurriedly intervened to stop them.

“That’s enough! Save the talking for later and take us where we need to go. My brother is waiting to see Lady Rozemyne.”

“Right, right. Shall we go?”

The cackling villagers guided us to the building separate from the main mansion and opened the door for us. I could feel those in our party who were only familiar with commoner-noble relations back in Ehrenfest stiffen up and pale, unsure how to react to all this.

“Erm, Lady Rozemyne...” Fran began, making the same face he always did when he was getting ready to protest about something.

I waved my hand dismissively. “Fran, the culture here is different from in Ehrenfest; so long as there is no danger, there is no need for us to say anything. I ask that you accept the way things are and understand that not everywhere is the same.”

“But—”

“If you feel particularly overwhelmed, express your discontent first to Giebe Illgner or Brigitte, not the commoners themselves. Damaging our relationship with them now will cause problems for the Plantin Company and the gray priests who are to be working around them.”

Benno, observing that I took no issue with the behavior of the commoners and thus wouldn’t be raising a fuss, started ordering his merchants and the gray priests to carry our stuff out of my Pandabus. We would have nowhere to sleep if they didn’t prepare the rooms in time.

Brigitte would be staying at the summer mansion, of course, and since Damuel and I were also nobles, we had rooms prepared there as well. Monika would be staying with me, and Fran with Damuel. Gil (who would be working with the Plantin Company on this trip) and Hugo couldn't enter my chambers, since they were both men, and as such they would be sleeping in the detached building.

Once all the luggage had been taken out, I put away Lessy and followed Brigitte into the Illgner mansion. Unlike in Ehrenfest, the furnishings inside were not made by artist craftsmen of the highest caliber competing to make the fanciest product possible, but were rather simple and rustic goods with a comforting, handmade feel to them.

"Lady Rozemyne, welcome to Illgner."

"I thank you ever so much for your invitation, Giebe Illgner."

Giebe Illgner was waiting for us with his family in a parlor for visitors. His wife, their kids, and Brigitte's mother were all there.

"May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire?"

"You may."

I was subsequently introduced to the family. Giebe Illgner's wife and Brigitte's mother both offered me their greetings, after which Giebe Illgner gestured to the prepared tea.

"Would you care for some tea while the attendants are preparing your room? We have much to discuss."

Brigitte was serving as my guard knight and thus couldn't greet her family, which Giebe Illgner was treating as a matter of course. But the rest of the family were clearly itching to speak to her.

I looked between Brigitte and the others, before eventually speaking up. "Brigitte, I entrust the duty of guarding me to Damuel. You may take some time off until it is time for us to leave."

She looked at me in disbelief, then shook her head. "I must continue serving as your guard."

"I appreciate having the company of someone as familiar with Illgner as you are, but I have many questions that I would like to ask you. As you are, you cannot participate in this discussion. Am I wrong?"

A guard knight who prioritized anything over protecting their charge would usually be seen as having abandoned their duty. As one would

expect, Brigitte, in all her diligence, hardly ever spoke while on the job.

“Furthermore, you are finally home again after such a long time. I want to give your family time to speak with you as well. Brigitte, this is an order. Get changed and have tea with us.”

“...As you wish,” she conceded, kneeling down with a defeated smile and crossing her arms in front of her chest. She then exited the room to get changed, as ordered.

Seeing this, Giebe Illgner frowned a little in confusion. “You certainly are a strange one, Lady Rozemyne. I must say that you are entirely unlike any other archnoble I know.”

“As you are aware, Giebe Illgner, unlike most normal archnobles, I was raised in the temple. While there, I conversed with orphans, and met with the likes of merchants and craftsmen in the lower city. The culture here suits me much more than that of the capital,” I replied. The air and scenery here were nice, and the townsfolk came off as genuinely kindhearted people. I felt as calm as I did while in the lower city, which couldn’t be said for the castle with its many scheming inhabitants.

...Though the book room honestly does make up for most of that.

“My apologies for the wait,” Brigitte said, having quickly finished getting changed. We all drank tea together and discussed our plans for the days to come. Eventually, Monika came in to tell me that my room had been prepared.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we get you changed?”

“Indeed. If you’ll excuse me, everyone.”

Brigitte could probably talk with her family more directly once I was gone. I exited the parlor and closed the door behind me, immediately hearing an enthusiastic, “Welcome home, Brigitte!” as I started walking away. The familial love in their voices really made me want to go home myself—to my home in the lower city.

I changed out of my outfit for visiting nobles and into one for walking around a farming town, at which point Fran and Gil came to see me. According to them, Damuel’s room was also ready, and the others had largely finished preparing the detached building.

“Everyone has a place to sleep tonight. For now, we’re identifying where by the river the workshop shall be constructed and setting up our tools.”

“The Plantin Company wishes to speak with Giebe Illgner about the Plant Paper Guild as soon as possible. They would like for you to be present as a mediator to ensure both sides can reach a fair deal.”

We knew from our earlier discussion in the castle that, since people primarily just bartered within Illgner, their revenue would be better secured if we established a guild here that would help them to sell the paper they made at the proper market price. It would probably be wise to arrange the talk soon, given that meetings with nobles always took forever to schedule, so I wrote a swift request for one, which I had Fran deliver. Meanwhile, I told Gil the plans for tomorrow that we had ironed out over tea moments ago.

“Tomorrow, a knowledgeable member of the community will guide us around the area. I would like to gather any kind of wood that seems good for making paper, so prepare baskets and knives alongside clothes for traveling through a forest.”

“As you wish.”

“Furthermore, it seems that tonight’s dinner will be local meat and vegetables grilled on iron griddles. They really are going all out to welcome us. Please tell Hugo to assist them in preparing the food.”

As I listed out everything that was important for them to know, Fran returned with clear worry on his face.

“Is something the matter, Fran?”

“...Giebe Illgner has said that he would like to speak with you now.”

When dealing with Ehrenfest nobles, one needed to send letters and arrange meetings several days ahead of time out of consideration for them having any existing plans. But it seemed that Giebe Illgner had said there was no need to wait so long when we both already knew that our schedules were free. That was fine with me, since it saved us both time and effort, but Fran was so used to noble society in the city that he simply wasn’t comfortable with how this backcountry province did things.

“Fran, there is no need to think so deeply about this. Benno can’t spend too long away from his store, so the faster he finishes his business here, the better.”

“That may be true, but...”

I had Gil go to fetch Benno, then went to Giebe Illgner’s office with Fran despite his persistent frown. Benno and Damian were both surprised at

how quickly the meeting had been arranged, but they were so used to nobles rushing things at their own convenience that they weren’t at all upset.

“Giebe Illgner, we thank you for your time.”

Benno spoke with Giebe Illgner as a representative of the Plant Paper Guild, while I simply sat back and watched as a mediator. Damian would be staying in Illgner as a representative of the Plantin Company, and thus wanted to see the exact wording of the signed contract himself.

We had already finished ironing out most of the details back in the castle, so the contract was written up and signed in no time.

Illgner’s Brigitte

Dinner was a massive barbecue alongside the local commoners, prepared on several large metal griddles that each grilled a bunch of food at once.

“I hope everything suits your taste,” Monika said while serving me a dish.

“These vegetables are unlike what I am used to, perhaps due to this province having a different climate than Ehrenfest. But the ingredients are all fresh and new to me, so I am sure they will taste more than delicious even just cooked with salt,” I replied, taking a bite of something that was apparently called a rezzuch. It looked similar to a plum, but quite coincidentally tasted just like a zucchini.

I looked around while I chewed. There were proper seats for nobles, but everyone else was sitting all over the place on solid, knocked-over logs or sizable rocks, which made it hard to find anyone in particular. I had no idea where the gray priests or the Plantin Company were.

...*Ah.*

Eventually, I found the gray priests frozen in place with their plates from the temple in hand, so used to eating based on status and dividing food equally that they had no idea what to do. The worry was clear on their faces as they struggled to determine whether it was okay for them to begin, and if so, how much they were actually permitted to eat.

“C’mon, load some food onto those plates.”

“I-Indeed...”

Some locals seemed to notice their hesitancy and called out words of encouragement, but the priests were much too used to food being distributed equally among them. They had never gotten to dish up their own meals before, so the cautious frowns on their faces didn’t ease in the slightest.

“Monika, would you kindly call Lutz for me?”

“But I must continue serving your food, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I have plenty before me at the moment. You need only hurry.”

“As you wish.”

She promptly hurried off and found Lutz, who had planted himself in front of a griddle and was devouring as much meat and as many vegetables as he could. When she came back with him, he looked a little unhappy to have been ripped away from all the food.

“Lady Rozemyne, you called for me...?”

“My apologies, but could you teach Gil and the other gray priests how to eat here? They have only ever been served food at the orphanage, and it seems they are struggling to figure things out.”

“You serious?! Erm, excuse me. Your wish is my command.”

Lutz had spent his childhood having to constantly fight his brothers for food, so the idea of not just grabbing whatever was in front of you and okay to eat was simply incomprehensible to him. Still, he knew how strange temple culture was, so after an exasperated headshake, he walked over to where the gray priests were still frozen.

“Come on, the food won’t last forever,” he said to Gil, piling meat and vegetables from the metal griddles onto his plate. “You just gotta grab what you want and eat it. That’s how it works. Lady Rozemyne herself wants you all to participate.”

Gil looked at his now full plate, then at me, then at everyone around him. Only then did he finally start eating. The gray priests observed this and put the same amount of the same things onto their plates before beginning to eat as well.

Mm... Will the gray priests really be able to survive here? Now I’m worried that they won’t last until the Harvest Festival.

That was when I noticed that neither Monika nor Fran, who was serving Damuel, had eaten anything themselves. Since the people here didn’t take turns to eat based on status, they would have no dinner at all unless they joined in.

“Fran, Monika—I ask that you eat with us as well. I am afraid you will get nothing otherwise; there are no divine gifts here like there are in the temple.”

“But we must serve your food,” Fran replied.

I looked around and saw that both Giebe Illgner and his family were taking their plates to the commoners in charge of cooking and getting their

food directly from them.

“I can get my own food, too,” I began.

“Absolutely not,” Fran and Monika responded in unison, rejecting me on the spot.

I slumped my shoulders. “Monika... at the very least, ask Hugo to set some food aside for the both of you.”

“But who will serve you in the meantime?” she asked with a sincere look.

I was at a loss for words; to her, serving me was genuinely more important than eating. While I found her dedication heartwarming and cute, I wanted her to care about herself, too.

“I will inform him,” Brigitte said, standing up and walking over to the cooks with her empty plate. She chatted with the locals who called out to her along the way, drank the beer she was offered, and laughed with everyone she came across. She eventually reached Hugo, who was at the griddles cooking load after load of meat and vegetables with the locals, at which point she passed on my instructions. While there, I also saw her pile more food onto her plate.

“This must be the real Dame Brigitte,” Fran murmured with a stunned expression, having been caught entirely off guard by how differently she was acting.

“She is with her own family here, after all. I think Brigitte is far more wonderful when she is smiling and so at ease. Though if this were Ehrenfest, she would certainly be called unladylike,” I mused before turning to look at Damuel, who was just as frozen in shock as Fran. “Damuel, you were raised in the Noble’s Quarter of Ehrenfest. What do you think about Brigitte right now? Are you disillusioned with her now that she is acting nothing like a noble?”

“I’m, ah... surprised to see her acting so unlike her normal self, but, er... um... I think she’s very pretty like this,” he replied quietly, scratching his cheek and averting his eyes.

“I see. I shall be sure to tell her that.”

“Please don’t!”

My goodwill was rejected instantly, but I graciously complied with Damuel’s request. After all, I didn’t enjoy bullying him *that* much.

“Very well, then I shall keep it a secret for you.”

“Thank you,” he replied with a sigh of relief. I couldn’t help but smile, though; he didn’t even notice the fact that I was far from the only one in earshot.

I don’t have to say anything to Brigitte, because I’m certain her grinning family will take it upon themselves to tell her.

The next day, the supposedly wisest old man among the locals walked with us to the mountains, more full of energy than one might expect from someone his age. I was in my highbeast, wearing my gathering outfit with my magic knife at hand, fully equipped to harvest whatever I needed. Damuel and Brigitte were wearing light armor, but their gear was lighter than usual to make walking up hills and such easier.

“It’s been too long since I’ve hiked through the mountains,” Brigitte said with visible excitement. She was off duty again today but had decided to travel with us nonetheless, having apparently hiked up mountains all the time before entering the knight dorms as an apprentice.

Benno was staying behind at the detached building to do some pressing work, with Damian helping him. Everyone else was accompanying us, with Lutz, Gil, and the gray priests shouldering baskets and wielding knives like they always did when gathering in the forest.

“Hrm, hrm. Ye be lookin’ for tall trees with thin, soft fibers like volrin wood, then?”

“That’s right. And the younger the tree is, the better. Does anything come to mind?”

Brigitte was in the lead as we went up the mountain trail, with Damuel in tow. The old man and I were walking side by side behind them, followed by Lutz and Gil, and finally the gray priests.

“Ye got yer rinfin, yer schireis... If ye don’t mind feyplants, there’re nansebs and effons ’round these parts, too.”

“I agree with his assessment,” Brigitte said from the front. “We should spend today cutting down nansebs and effons.”

The old man went on to tell us all about the trees that didn’t exist back in Ehrenfest. There were a ton of names that I didn’t recognize, but there were apparently four different kinds that immediately came to mind as being particularly young and soft. Lutz and Gil desperately wrote them down and the ways to identify them.

“Nansebs and effons are feyplants that thrive in this season, so we should encounter several of them today. Even the local commoners can cut them down without much issue if they know how,” Brigitte said with a contented hum, explaining to the gray priests which fruits and mushrooms were edible, which were poisonous, and so on.

We walked along while gathering edible food, like always, when the old man suddenly stopped in place. He narrowed his eyes, glancing to the side. “There, m’lady. One of them nansebs ye want.”

“That tree is walking?!”

The old man was pointing toward a knee-high tree that was literally walking across the ground. Its roots moved like feet to push it steadily forward, slow enough that I could catch up to it myself, but... the fact that it was moving at all was bizarre. If nansebs could walk on their own, wouldn’t that make them animals, not plants?

“It’s looking for a healthy, nutrition-filled tree. Upon finding one, it will wrap its roots around it and plant its seeds into its base. These parasitic seeds suck out the tree’s nutrition, then peel away its dead bark before walking anew. They’re parasite trees,” Brigitte explained as she firmly grabbed one of the nansebs, chopping its moving roots off with a knife and tossing them into a bag as they continued to wriggle. “Since these roots absorb all the nutrition, be sure to retrieve them when cutting down nansebs,” she told the gray priests, who all nodded in response.

“M’lady, there’s a big dead tree o’er there. I’m guessin’ there’s a lot more nansebs ’round here. Can ye get ’em for me?”

“Certainly. You sit and rest,” Brigitte replied with a bright smile before running off with her knife in hand.

“I’ll join, too! They walk so slowly that even I can cut them. Let’s see who can gather the most wood!”

“Lady Rozemyne?!” Damuel exclaimed.

No doubt infected by my enthusiasm, Lutz and Gil ran off with their knives as well. I raced forward in Lessy, Damuel following behind us with a baffled look on his face.

“There’s one!”

Despite them being so short, the fact that nansebs walked about meant they easily stood out among the trees. I climbed out of my Pandabus and grabbed one with both hands. Brigitte could manage this with a single hand,

but that was too much for me. And to make matters worse, it seemed there was some knack to grabbing them that I didn't know; the nanseb I had caught was flailing its roots so aggressively that I couldn't keep it in place at all.

"Eep! Eep!" I cried, dropping it before I could even grab my knife.

No sooner had it touched the ground than Damuel quickly grabbed it himself.

"Damuel, no! I found that one!" I complained, glaring at him as though my prey had been stolen.

He sighed. "It's yours. I was intending to hold it still for you while you remove its roots."

"Perfect."

I poured mana into my magic knife, then cut off the nanseb's roots and stuck them in my bag. Much like with Brigitte, they continued to squirm about even after being severed.

"Yay! I did it too, Damuel!"

"There's another one over there. Let's go. Oh, but please use your highbeast to move."

With the help of my trusty guard knight, I was able to cut up three nansebs, at which point I heard a weird singsong voice. It wasn't the beautiful singing of a siren luring a ship to its demise, but rather a throaty screaming reminiscent of extreme rock and roll. Was someone really practicing here of all places?

"What is that...?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Let's not get close to things we don't understand, and instead ask our guide what's going on."

But the singing was getting louder and louder. I needed to know what it was. I had to go and find out. And now that it was louder, I could tell that it wasn't just one singing voice: there were several.

"Damuel, can't we just take a little peek?"

"Absolutely not. Who knows what could happen?" he responded with a glare.

And so, having no other choice, I returned to where the old man was. At his feet was a small mountain of about ten nansebs that Brigitte had harvested. I told her about the singing we had heard while she chugged water from a flask, after which she instantly nodded in recognition.

“Those are effons. They’re loud and annoying but pose no real threat.”

It seemed that they sang fairly quietly when on their own, but when several were within singing distance of one another, they grew louder and louder, as if they were competing.

What in the world...?

“Though if you heard that many voices, we must hurry and harvest them as quickly as we can,” Brigitte continued. “They get *very* loud.”

We waited in place for the gray priests to gather together so that Brigitte could teach them what to do all at once, but as we did, the singing became more and more audible. The screams were quickly getting louder.

“Annoying, ain’t it, m’lady?” the old man chortled.

Together, we all headed toward the source of the noise. I was the only one riding in a highbeast, but I was just glad that I could keep up with people for once without being left behind.

My Pandabus truly is something else.

As we continued, the singing was soon accompanied by a rustling from among the trees. But there wasn’t much wind blowing at all. When we eventually arrived, the screams were so deafening that I surely would have been covering my ears had I not been driving.

“Wow, it sure is enthusiastic...”

The rustling hadn’t been caused by the wind after all—a singing effon was fervently swinging its branches about in a headbanging motion. Everyone watched the bobbing tree in a daze.

“Ah! Ah! Ah, AH! *AAAAAAAAAAAH!”*

All of a sudden, it let out a scream so loud that I yelped and covered my ears. I could see the gray priests doing the same out of the corner of my eye. An impossibly loud noise was echoing out of the apparently hollow hole in the tree’s center. I thought it had been singing a song due to how rhythmical it sounded from a distance, but as it turned out, this was purely coincidental; the sound it was making lacked any cadence whatsoever.

An instant later, another effon reacted to the loud screaming and started bobbing even more intensely.

“Ooo! Oooooo! *OOOOOOOOOH!”*

There must have been a lot of effons growing in the area, as we could hear various cries of, “Wooh! Wooh! Raaaaaah!” all over the place as each one asserted its presence. To describe it as annoying would be an

understatement; the sound pollution was so bad that it was actually disruptive to life. Calling effons “harmless” feyplants was absolutely a mistake, if you asked me.

“Lady Rozemyne, will this one make for good paper?” Brigitte asked, having inched toward me.

I looked up at the effon, which was even bigger than her, and shook my head. “I think the tall ones have grown too large to be used for paper. The small ones over there might be good, though.”

“Then we shall aim for the feystones in the larger effons. Damuel, you take care of the ones over there; I can handle these.”

They both whipped out their schtappes and morphed them into the halberd-like spear-axe things I had seen before, though they weren’t black this time due to not having the God of Darkness’s blessing cast on them.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve,” I began, “I pray that you grant Brigitte and Damuel your divine protection.”

With that, blue light shone out of my ring and flew up into the air, subsequently raining down onto their heads. Damuel tightened his grip on his halberd and glared at the effons while Brigitte scanned the area with her amethyst eyes.

“Priests, stand back!”

Very few people were afforded the opportunity to watch knights in action, and the shockwaves of mana were a big reason for this—it was exceedingly dangerous for those without mana to be anywhere near knights engaged in combat.

“I will protect everyone with a Wind shield. You may fight without worrying about us.”

“Thank you, Lady Rozemyne.”

The two of them nodded, at which point I promptly told Gil and Lutz to gather everyone around me.

“O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of Wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause harm.”

A metallic clink resounded, and we were soon enveloped in an amber-colored dome.

“The heck is this?!”

“So this is Schutzaria’s shield...?”

“I had heard about it from Fran, but this is my first time seeing it myself.”

The old man fell backward onto the ground, incapable of comprehending what had just happened. Lutz looked up in much more contained surprise, while Gil excitedly clenched his fists with sparkling eyes. A few moments later, I noticed a couple of the gray priests helping the old man back to his feet.

“Damuel, the feystone is located inside the hole making the noise!” Brigitte yelled.

No doubt due to her previous experience hunting effons, she was the first one to act, letting out a loud cry as she swung her halberd with considerable force. Her attack struck the largest one, and a resounding boom rang out as it promptly exploded, raising a sizable cloud of dust and sending fragments of bark flying every which way. They weren’t able to break through the shield, but everyone let out shrieks and reflexively covered their heads.

Damuel readied his halberd next, matching Brigitte’s determination as he dashed toward a large effon that continued to sway about and scream. He slammed his weapon against it with an impassioned battle cry of his own, but perhaps due to him having less mana than Brigitte, that wasn’t enough to make it explode. Instead, his attack only left a deep gash in its trunk.

“Ngh!” he grunted, glaring at the gash with anguish before swinging his halberd again, then again. His third attack seemed to finally expose the feystone, which he quickly stabbed with the tip of his weapon and yanked out in one clean move. The effon continued to scream as it wilted away.

“Normally, even the large effons are cut down by lumberjacks using normal axes, but it would have taken much too long to gather them today. And with Damuel here, it was faster to simply take them down using mana,” Brigitte said, going on to explain that the lumberjacks would apparently stuff their ears to block out the singing before rushing in. “It should be easy for any of you to cut down the smaller ones. Follow me.”

At that, she headed off to harvest more effons with Lutz, Gil, and the other gray priests. I stayed behind with the old man, who was now sitting down to let his hips recover, and Damuel, who was serving as my guard.

“I’m just not getting stronger. My mana capacity is growing by the day, but... I’m just pathetic,” Damuel muttered, looking down at the small feystone he had just harvested.

I tilted my head. “You want to boost your attack power, Damuel?”

“Of course I do!”

“I assumed you were simply holding back to preserve more of your mana. I didn’t realize you weren’t doing it on purpose,” I said. He merely furrowed his brow in confusion, so I went ahead and explained what I meant. “You used as much mana in those attacks as you usually do. More mana won’t make you stronger if you don’t use it, right?”

“...Wait, what?”

Damuel blinked in surprise, having apparently not expected that explanation. He really hadn’t noticed what he was doing at all. I placed a hand on my cheek, then gave him a word problem.

“Consider the following: Damuel has thirty mana. He uses five mana per attack, which allows him to make six attacks in total. Lately, he’s increased his capacity to thirty-five mana, allowing him to now make seven attacks, but he just isn’t getting stronger and doesn’t understand why. Now, what should Damuel do to boost his attack power?”

Damuel looked at me, his eyes wide in realization, before gazing down at the feystone in his hand.

“Is it not that you are too used to fighting while conserving your mana? In my eyes, you seem skilled at using only one to five mana at a time, but

you don’t know how to use, say, twenty to thirty at all. If you want to boost your attack power, perhaps begin by learning to use more mana at once.”

Damuel was a laynoble with a pittance of mana, but he always fought alongside people who had far more than him. In practice, he left the powerful foes to them and instead focused on buying time, taking down the small fry, and providing support. He had developed a deeply ingrained habit of minimizing his mana usage so that he could fight for as long as feasibly possible, but by having him focus on using more mana at once, his attack power would surely skyrocket.

“You have my thanks for the advice,” Damuel said, his mopey expression vanishing as he put the feystone into his bag. His eyes were now brimming with determination, and I was glad to see he had set his sights on a new goal.

“We got a ton of wood, Lady Rozemyne!” Gil cried out, waving to me as he ran back over. The baskets that the priests were shouldering were indeed filled with wood.

“These are the degrova leaves that Dame Brigitte was talking about. When you soak them in water, they turn the water sticky, which might be able to replace the edile fruit,” Lutz said while showing me the contents of his bag. There were plenty of other plants that couldn’t be found around Ehrenfest in there, too.

“I shall be returning to Ehrenfest with Benno tomorrow, but with this many new materials, I believe you can get started as early as tomorrow.”

“Right!” Gil and the others replied with smiles and nods.

And so we began our descent down the mountain. Brigitte took the lead alongside the old man, the gray priests following closely behind as they helped him to stay up. Then came Gil and Lutz, with Damuel and me guarding the rear.

“Good luck,” I whispered to Lutz from inside my highbeast, speaking quietly enough to be drowned out by everyone else’s voices.

He glanced my way with a grin. “Hey, you’re the one who needs luck here. Your potion ingredients can only be picked once a year, right? I won’t be able to cheer you up like last time if you mess up again.”

“Ngh. I’ll be fine. As I said, Ferdinand is going to be with us. I’ll do my best so that I can tell you it all went perfectly when I come to get you during the Harvest Festival.”

“Same. I’ll... I’m gonna work hard so that, when you come back, I’ll have all sorts of new paper waiting for you.”

That night, we served Hugo’s cooking to Giebe Illgner and his family, then made plans to return to Ehrenfest early the next morning. Joining me on the journey back were Benno, Fran, Monika, Hugo, and my two guard knights. Everyone else was staying behind to work on developing new types of paper.

Lots of townsfolk gathered to see us off. Giebe Illgner knelt at the front as their representative, and I used this opportunity to speak to him one last time.

“Illgner has many kinds of trees not present near Ehrenfest. If the wood found here can indeed be made into new paper, then that paper will no doubt become a valuable export for your province. I ask that you provide my workers with your full support.”

“It will be done.”

I then turned to look at Brigitte, who was standing behind me wearing her deadpan, serious knight expression. “Brigitte, you may say your farewells. Speaking with one’s family is important, and once we have departed, it will be quite some time before you return.”

“Brother, Mother... Everyone. I’ll be back.”

“Stay strong, Brigitte, and serve Lady Rozemyne well.”

With that, the seven of us climbed into Lessy, all those gathered kneeling and crossing their arms before us as we soared up into the air.

Mount Lohenberg

One day had passed since my return from Illgner.

I made my way to Ferdinand's chambers at third bell to assist him as usual, and upon my arrival, I spotted Eckhart. It seemed that he now had the hang of serving as a guard knight in the temple, but rather than standing in front of the door as my guard knights did, he was being made to help out like everyone else. Judging by how unfazed the blue priests and attendants all were, this was already a common sight here.

"Ferdinand, should you really be making Eckhart do paperwork? Isn't he your only guard knight?"

"You, Rozemyne, require a guard beside you at all times, especially with the increased activity of priests as of late. But I have no such need myself; I can make do on my own, even in the case of a surprise attack. You, on the other hand, collapse without even needing someone to attack you. Could the difference between us be any clearer?"

There was nothing I could say to that. I really did collapse on my own, so having someone watch over me was crucial. My hope had been that Damuel could do scholar work even on days where Brigitte was absent, but Ferdinand quickly shot that idea down.

"Justus should be coming later this morning. Finish your work before then so that we can discuss this season's ingredient," Ferdinand said.

"Right!"

With that, I worked my way through the load of math that had built up over my several days of absence.

Upon returning from Illgner, Fran had commented with a weak smile that he hadn't expected a simple change in environment to be so exhausting. Thankfully, now that we had returned to the temple, it appeared he was beginning to recharge.

Just as Ferdinand said, Justus arrived at the temple in no time at all, a good deal sooner than fourth bell. His eyes shone with excitement as he walked up to Ferdinand's desk with a skip in his step, looking every which

way for something of note.

“Good morning, Lord Ferdinand. And welcome back, Lady Rozemyne. How was Illgner? Did you perhaps stumble upon anything interesting while you were there?” he asked, sounding rather giddy. He then went on to express his excitement about our upcoming lunch, having a chance to speak with me, and getting to see the workshop for himself.

“I would rather you not make my plans for me. I intend to visit the orphanage today, not the workshop.”

“May I tour the orphanage, then? I am deeply curious to visit this place blessed enough to have received your compassion. From what I remember, the orphans can all read and write. Is this true?” Justus asked with an unfaltering smile. He was a noble, so he knew full well that my response had been meant as a complete—albeit indirect—refusal.

Had I continued to follow the social script like a proper noblewoman, I would have conceded here and Justus would have invited himself into the orphanage, but I didn’t want to get stuck changing my plans for him. I dropped the euphemisms and this time refused him outright.

“You may tour the workshop and orphanage when Ferdinand is available to accompany you, but until then, you must wait. I feel that you are otherwise likely to wander around on your own and cause problems for me.”

“Oh, is there anything there you don’t want me seeing?” he asked, intrigued.

I shot him a firm glare. A forceful guy like Justus barging into the orphanage to satisfy his curiosity would only make Wilma’s androphobia worse.

“Due to aggressive blue priests, there are gray shrine maidens in the orphanage who have grown to fear men entirely. Men are not allowed to enter the girls’ building as a result, but I am aware that you are not one to obey such rules.”

“I see, I see...” Justus murmured, nodding along while looking not at all dissuaded. “So I could go inside as long as I’m dressed like a woman?”

I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was serious—that he was fully prepared to cross-dress if doing so would get him into the girls’ building. I shook my head and crossed my arms in the shape of a large “X.”

“No! I hereby forbid you from entering the orphanage at all.”

“What?! That’s nothing short of cruel!” he wailed, but I had no intention of allowing a weirdo who would dress up like a woman to get into the girls’ building anywhere near the orphanage. Who knew what kind of negative influence he might have on the children? It just wasn’t safe for me to let Justus’s curiosity run rampant; as the High Bishop and orphanage director, I needed to protect the orphans no matter what.

As I steeled my resolve, Ferdinand let out an exaggerated sigh and waved his hand to silence us. “Save this nonsense for later. We have more pressing matters to discuss.”

At that, he cleared the room of attendants. The priests left silently, leaving only those who would be participating in my gathering—guard knights included.

Ferdinand pointed at a southern mountain on a spread-out map. “Our next destination is to be Mount Lohenberg. The summer ingredient shall be at its most mana-rich five days from now, and for this reason, we shall be leaving in four days’ time.”

It seemed that, had I not been well enough to promptly return from Illgner, Ferdinand had been prepared to come and pick me up.

“Ferdinand, what are we gathering this time?”

“A riesefalke egg. Riesefalkes are birds said to ease the wrath of Leidenschaft, the God of Fire. An egg from them will be your ingredient.”

“Wait, what? If these riesefalkes are able to calm a god, doesn’t that make them a holy bird or something? And we’re stealing their eggs? I feel like that must be heretical. I mean, really...?” I mused aloud, only for Ferdinand to shake his head.

“Fear not—riesefalkes are not particularly holy birds; they are simply a species of feybeast. We will also have means of dealing with Leidenschaft’s wrath,” he said. Then, his expression turned quizzical. “Why are you so hesitant about this? Did you not kill a schnesturm for its feystone in the winter? If one considers the talfroschs in the spring and zantzes in the autumn, a mountain of feybeasts have already been slain for your ingredients. Why would a single egg bother you now?”

“You have a point...” I replied. The road to my jureve was already paved with feybeast corpses, and when thinking about it like that, stealing a single egg was hardly something to kick up a fuss about.

“That said, if we do not take care to keep the feybeasts on Mount

Lohenberg alive while retrieving the ingredient, Leidenschaft's wrath will burst. Refraining from killing them will prove to be the most challenging aspect of this season's gathering."

"What happens exactly when his wrath isn't kept under control?"

"Ah, yes—in such a case, the mountain will explode with fire."

That's called an eruption, isn't it...? Does this mean Mount Lohenberg is a volcano? If so, what does killing feybeasts have to do with it erupting?

"Riesefalke eggs hatch by absorbing the mana within the mountain," Ferdinand continued. "A shortage of eggs will consequently lead to an excess of mana."

Justus nodded, providing his own explanation. "When too much mana builds up, Leidenschaft grows irate and begins shooting out fire. You can trust us here; I previously gathered too many eggs at once and nearly made it happen."

"Excuse me?!" I exclaimed. I assumed for a second that I had misheard him, but it seemed this wasn't the case.

Ferdinand rubbed his temples and let out a heavy sigh. "That was not a pleasant day..."

"Indeed. At the time, I truly thought all hope was lost," Eckhart added.

With that, both Ferdinand and Eckhart looked incredibly distant. Justus had apparently put them in quite the terrible situation. He was top-class when it came to gathering information, but in most other areas he was genuinely dangerous—in more ways than one.

"Now, now," Justus interjected. "Let's not forget that our experience back then is proving useful to us here."

"I do not wish to experience that ever again. Thus, I am being as thorough as possible with our preparations," Ferdinand shot back. I could trust that he would use that... unpleasant incident... to ensure we didn't have a similar problem when gathering my ingredient.

"I shall leave the preparations to you, Ferdinand. Thank you once again."

Four days passed.

After finishing lunch, we immediately prepared to depart for Mount Lohenberg via highbeast. Ferdinand, Eckhart, Damuel, and Brigitte were going to be accompanying me. Justus had wanted to come along as well,

but his hopes were quickly dashed; Ferdinand harshly shut him down and used his connections with the castle's scholars to push an enormous load of urgent work onto him.

"There is no end to the problems that Justus causes, wandering over to whatever interests him and paying no heed to the impact his actions may have. He has already caused one such issue on Mount Lohenberg in the past. He is too risky to have with us, especially when this is a race against time," Ferdinand said bluntly, making no attempt to hide his frustration.

There were no towns near the gathering spot this time, so time really was of the essence. None of us were bringing attendants, and the knights were treating this as seriously as a military march. Our meals would be composed of field rations, we were to bathe exclusively via the use of cleansing magic, and I would be forced back to health with potions if at any point I grew sick.

The most I could do in terms of getting a decent meal during our trip was ask Ella and Hugo to make a packed lunch for me. I consulted Ferdinand on ways to keep the food from going bad on the journey, at which point he lent me a small magic icebox. It seemed there was already a packed lunch inside, and I put mine in alongside it before storing the icebox in Lessy.

Ferdinand had told me to minimize my luggage so that I could make Lessy as small as possible, but thanks to him, I was having to carry extra regardless.

...Not that it really matters. I still find it annoying for some reason, though.

"Please take care, Lady Rozemyne. We shall ensure your bed is prepared and potions are available for your return. Come back as soon as you can," Fran said before we left, making it clear that he expected me to be bedridden by the end of all this. He was probably right, but I was hoping to get through this gathering session having drank as few potions as possible.

And so, with my worried attendants seeing us off, we departed for Mount Lohenberg. Eckhart took the lead, I followed behind with Damuel and Brigitte on either side of me, and Ferdinand stayed at the rear.

It had been unbearably hot the past ten days, as one would normally expect in the summer. It felt as though I was melting beneath the sun's rays, and flying high in the sky on my highbeast only made the heat worse. I was

the only one who felt that way, though, as the knights were all wearing magic armor. The effectiveness varied a little based on the individual's mana, but those wearing it could apparently barely feel the heat or cold.

It seems like it'd be so hot inside those full sets of armor that I start to melt just looking at them, but they actually negate the heat completely! Hmph! I don't think that's fair at all.

We raced on and on to the south, passing over the Central District with its many farms to reach land with more forests and hills. Eventually, we began seeing more and more mountains, and another short while passed before we saw an especially tall mountain that stood out even among the others connected to it.

Is that it? Ferdinand did say Mount Lohenberg was the tallest mountain of its mountain range.

A verdant forest of towering trees stretched out from the base of the mountain. Perhaps due to previous eruptions, this was reduced to only small, sturdy trees and grass from about halfway up. Near the summit, there were no traces of plants at all, leaving only a bare and rocky surface. Thankfully, there was no smoke or anything to indicate an eruption coming anytime soon.

Eckhart's highbeast—a wolf with wings—began descending toward the ground, and so I did the same with Lessy. When we arrived at the base of the mountain, the summer sun was beginning to set.

"Our work begins early tomorrow morning, and the gathering will ideally be performed when the sun is at its brightest. As for tonight, Rozemyne, we will all be sleeping inside your highbeast. Enlarge it once you and Brigitte have cleansed yourself with magic," Ferdinand explained. "I... would not like a repeat of what happened during the spring."

His last statement came out exceedingly bitter. It seemed he was ashamed of previously having let us girls sleep in the highbeast on our own, given that it led to us getting kidnapped and thrown into a risky situation he had been unable to do anything about.

As we discussed our plans for tomorrow, Ferdinand and I ate our packed meals while the other three had their rations. Then, once everyone was done, Brigitte and I climbed into Lessy to cleanse ourselves.

"Now then, Lady Rozemyne—I will perform the cleansing spell," Brigitte said before whipping out her schtappe and chanting something

under her breath. I hadn’t been sure when it would take effect, which meant I was engulfed by a massive droplet of water before I could even hold my nose.

“Nghugubghh?!”

Am I going to drown?!

Cleansing magic posed no real danger to anyone, since the process only took a few seconds. As much as I knew that, in the moment, I truly thought I was going to die. When you couldn’t breathe, a few seconds seemed to last forever.

“Are you alright, Lady Rozemyne?! My sincerest apologies.”

“Ngh... I’m okay. I just didn’t know when to hold my breath.”

Brigitte hurriedly apologized, a look of sheer horror on her face, but the water had already vanished and I was completely fine. It was a little weird for all the water blocking my nose to have disappeared in an instant, but other than that, my whole body felt clean and refreshed.

“Please do get back on track, Brigitte. We must summon the men when we are done.”

I halted Brigitte’s apologies by reminding her that we were in a hurry, then enlarged Lessy so that we could all fit inside. Once Brigitte was done cleansing herself, I opened up the door so that the others could carry their things in.

“Ah, so this is Rozemyne’s highbeast, hm?” Eckhart muttered to himself. He looked around and touched a seat, commenting on how soft it was out of surprise.

“I believe sleeping in here should be much better than sleeping outside —not only are the seats comfortable, but you will have space to stretch your legs. So, Ferdinand? Isn’t my Lessy amazing?”

“The word that comes to mind is ‘bizarre.’”

Why does he have to be so hardheaded?! Why can’t he see the glory of my Pandabus?!

I silently cursed Ferdinand as he looked around inside with a grimace. Even though he appreciated how efficient Lessy was, he was annoyingly reluctant to change his opinion on him. He needed to fix his stubbornness, if you asked me.

As I watched the knights settle on which order they would perform night watch, Ferdinand noticed me and started shooing me away. “Rozemyne,

there is no need for you to watch us. Tomorrow will not be easy. Rest well so that you are not dead weight to us," he said, and since he was several times scarier than Rihyarda, I hurried off to bed.

Brigitte woke me up just as the sun was about to rise. I sat up in a daze and climbed out of my Pandabus, where I found the knights preparing their rations.

"These seem kind of bland," I commented after trying some.

"Naturally. They are made from powdered grains and vegetables, soaked in salt and wine, drained of water, and then hardened into balls," Ferdinand replied.

"Well, I think they would last longer and taste better if you added a bit *more* salt to them."

The knight rations were brown balls about the size of ping-pong balls, and they were eaten after being soaked in warm water for a bit. Their nutritional value and long-lasting nature made them desirable to have, but they were far from delicious.

"In situations where one does not have the time to soak them, it is possible to fill your stomach by simply biting into one and washing it down with water. Adding more salt would make that less feasible. You only have yourself to blame for soaking yours in too much hot water."

We left as soon as we had finished breakfast, mounting our highbeasts and traveling up to what looked like a gaping wound in the side of Mount Lohenberg that was wide enough for an adult to climb through without issue. Since normal highbeasts needed to keep their wings spread out, there wasn't enough space inside to keep riding them, meaning the knights were forced to walk instead. I would need to shrink Lessy as much as I could and follow behind.

"Ngh, it stinks..."

I had been anticipating the smell ever since learning Mount Lohenberg was a volcano, but it seriously took no time at all for the overpowering stench of sulfur to hit us. We hadn't even entered the chasm yet, and the grimace Damuel was wearing spoke to just how bad the smell was.

"Complaining is pointless. You will get used to it soon enough," Ferdinand replied. There was a potion that dulled one's sense of smell, but using it would apparently make it harder for us to notice any approaching

feybeasts.

Ferdinand entered first despite wearing a similar pained expression to the rest of us. Brigitte followed, then me, Damuel, and finally Eckhart. Everyone slowly traveled down the side of the chasm, finding footholds on its uneven rocky surface, while I casually hopped down in Lessy.

“Do not wander off ahead of us, fool. Who knows what might be down there?”

“Sorry.”

Soon enough, the light trickling in from the surface faded. Everything went dark, making it hard to see where we were putting our feet. The ventilation became a lot more restricted, too, with the air becoming thick and damp as the slope evened out.

“There is no more light ahead. Use this,” Ferdinand said, taking out a potion once everyone had reached the flat ground. He dripped some into his eyes like eye drops, then handed the potion to Eckhart, who did the same.

Soon enough, everyone had done it except me.

“Rozemyne, open your eyes,” Ferdinand said, reaching the potion toward me.

“I, um... I do not like eye drops very much.”

“They are necessary when walking about down here; whether you like them or not is irrelevant. Eckhart, hold her down.”

My eyes were forced open and the potion dripped into them. Something inside it made my eyes tingle. A sharp smell built up in the back of my nose, and a bitter taste spread through my mouth.

“Guhh... I hate eye drops. Please make these taste better as well.”

“What manner of eye drops have a flavor?” Ferdinand remarked. “Enough nonsense. We’re moving on.”

It’s not nonsense! They do have a taste!

As heated as his response made me, I was aware that only some people could taste eye drops, and he evidently just wasn’t one of them. This was an area where we would never be able to understand each other.

The eye drops were apparently a magic tool used to see in the darkness, and Ferdinand was right when he said they were necessary for moving about down here. My vision was covered with a dark-orange filter, like the area was being lit by a dim light bulb in the middle of the night, but at least I could see.

After advancing for a bit, we came across a spring where we set up camp to rest. Much like the rest of the chasm, it stank of sulfur, which led me to assume it was just like a natural hot spring. I wanted to try sticking my hands into it.

“Ferdinand, would it be okay for me to put my hands into the spring?”

“Now is not the time to play around, fool. What would you do if a feybeast were residing inside? And what is the point of doing so in the first place? If you wish to wash your hands, ask one of the knights to perform cleansing magic on you.”

“Well, it’s not that I want to wash my hands... I just thought it looked warm and would feel nice.”

I mean, who wouldn’t *want to get into a hot spring?*

But my suggestion was shot down with a condescending scoff. “Why would you ever want to enter such a foul-smelling spring? You will come out reeking as much as it does. If you really are so eager, you may be pleased to hear that the riesefalke eggs are located in the spring deepest within the chasm, meaning you are going to have to climb into one whether you like it or not.”

“Wait, really? The eggs are being incubated in a hot spring?”

So, like... they’re hot spring eggs?

As the name suggested, hot spring eggs were eggs traditionally slow cooked in the waters of a hot spring. This gave the white a nice custardy consistency while simultaneously making the yolk firm yet creamy. In an instant, my objective shifted from stealing an ingredient that calmed the wrath of a god, to obtaining a tasty snack.

“Ferdinand, could it be that riesefalke eggs taste incredibly delicious?” I asked out of curiosity, only for him to look at me with utter bafflement.

“What? They are an ingredient for potions. You pour mana into them to turn them into feystones. They are not food.”

“O-Oh, right. Of course.”

Aw, too bad. I wanted to try eating some...

After a short break, we continued our advance, the temperature steadily increasing as we went deeper into the cave. The heat and humidity was initially comparable to a summer’s day after rain, then to a bathroom right after a hot shower, and finally to the middle of a large commercial hot spring.

“It sure is hot...” I observed during our next break.

“Naturally,” Ferdinand replied coolly, still wearing the armor that negated all the heat.

Even though I was riding inside Lessy, I seemed to be more exhausted than anyone.

“Wrap a towel from inside the icebox around your neck,” Ferdinand said.

“Right...”

I wiped my face with a cold towel we had prepared the night before, then wrapped it around my neck. The chilly sensation cleared my foggy mind a little.

We had reached an area that was almost entirely a hot spring, and the air was thick with steam. I even spotted some reptile-looking things sleeping in the water, which made me realize that Ferdinand’s warning earlier hadn’t been unfounded.

“So long as they do not attack us, we may leave them be. It is important that we kill as few feybeasts as possible here.”

“Why is that, exactly?”

“The feybeasts draw mana from Mount Lohenberg as well. Hunting too many will cause mana to build up within the mountain, which will in turn cause fire to shoot out in an expression of Leidenschaft’s wrath.”

I could guess that Justus had killed a bunch of feybeasts while getting the eggs last time. There was no way Ferdinand would be this informed otherwise.

“The riesefalke eggs absorb mana much like the feybeasts. This, along with the heat, causes them to hatch. We have brought one Fire feystone of equivalent size to the egg as well as several other Fire feystones of various sizes, all of which are empty in terms of mana,” Ferdinand said, glancing down at a leather pouch on his hip. I could guess from how lumpy it was that the feystones were inside.

“What purpose will empty feystones serve?”

“When put in elementally rich locations, empty feystones draw mana from the environment. We shall exploit that behavior to steal an egg.”

“So we need something that will drain just as much mana as the egg does?”

“Indeed,” Ferdinand replied, offering a nod before starting to move

again. It was apparently time to continue our journey.

I put the now-warm towel back into the icebox before pulling out a cold replacement to wrap around my neck again.

We walked for a bit longer, the intense heat and humidity making it increasingly difficult to breathe. My nose had gotten used to the sulfur stench such that it no longer bothered me, but there was no adjusting to the temperature. At this point, it was definitely more like walking through a sauna than a bathroom; even inhaling was painful, as the hot steam filled my lungs.

“The spring is beyond that hole. We shall wait here for the mother bird to leave,” Ferdinand said, pointing at a dark hole nearby. This gathering would be a race against time in which we needed to grab the egg in the brief window when the mother bird went to hunt for food. I was a little nervous, since I already lacked speed and stamina, and the heat was just draining me further.

As we waited, worries about how I would do swirled around in my head. It was hot enough that even staying in one place was physically exhausting, but we kept quiet so as to not disturb the feybeasts around us.

I honestly couldn’t say how long we waited. It felt like forever, but perhaps it hadn’t been long at all. I came back to my senses when I heard a loud flapping noise come from deeper within the cave. It gradually faded into the distance, at which point Ferdinand smoothly stood up.

“It is time.”

The moment we started dashing toward the hole, however, the surface of a nearby hot spring rippled and something leapt out. Even with the orange eye drop filter over my vision, I could see that it was a blazing red, entirely as though it was covered with burning fire. It was as tall as Ferdinand, looking like a mix between a giant salamander and a frill-necked lizard, and was blocking our way in an attempt to protect its own eggs.

“I would really appreciate you moving!” I cried. “We’re not here for your eggs!”

Of course, feybeasts couldn’t understand language, and the creature was already in a fighting stance. I knew it would be easy enough for Ferdinand or Eckhart to take down, especially considering all the much larger and deadlier feybeasts we had fought in the past, but here we needed to be careful about how many we killed.

“Eckhart, you know how to gather the egg. Damuel, keep watch for the riesefalke’s return,” Ferdinand said, fixing the lizard with a glare while removing the pouch on his waist and tossing it toward Eckhart. “I will capture this feybeast without killing it. You all can hurry and retrieve the egg we need.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Riesefalke Egg

Eckhart briskly tied the bag from Ferdinand onto his waist, the feystones inside audibly knocking against each other. “Rozemyne, Damuel—prepare to move the moment Lord Ferdinand captures the eiderot,” he said in a low voice.

We both nodded. I tightened my grip on Lessy’s steering wheel as I watched Ferdinand withdraw his schtappe and aim it at the eiderot, but the instant he did, the feybeast opened its mouth wide and belched fire.

“Eep?!” I shrieked, shutting my eyes tight and reflexively raising a hand to protect my face. The fire spewing from its mouth didn’t reach very far, its range ultimately being about as short as that of a street fire performer, but it certainly succeeded at making it appear threatening.

“*Geteilt*.”

A split second later, I heard a loud metallic clang accompanied by a throaty choke from the eiderot. I hesitantly lowered my arm and opened my eyes to see that it had been knocked back several meters, now hurriedly attempting to regain its footing.

It had apparently intended to tackle Ferdinand while blowing out more fire, but he had produced Schutzaria’s shield faster than it could charge him. He then turned the shield inside out to capture the eiderot as it attempted to tackle him a second time. This was exactly the same method I had used to imprison the goltze last year during the Night of Schutzaria, but Ferdinand was evidently much better at controlling his mana than I was, as the shield was steadily shrinking in size.

“Go!” he ordered.

We immediately raced past Ferdinand as he maintained the shield, the eiderot rampaging inside as we sprinted toward the innermost spring.

“Ferdinand, there’s another one coming!” I cried, turning my head a little upon spotting another eiderot reflected in my rear-view mirror.

“That will not be an issue,” came his reassuring reply. And with that, I knew he would be fine without us.

We passed through a narrow passageway and into a slightly more open area that looked entirely different from all the caves we had traversed. In a world dyed orange by the eye drops, only the spring before us faintly shone a pale blue color. White steam rose from its surface, distorting my vision a little and making everything seem even more fantastical.

I could tell from the bubbling sound that the hot water was rising from deep underground, and the complex patterns wavering on its surface were a sure sign that the spring originated from various sources. As I peered down at the shimmering water, I could just barely see the faint outline of some eggs. It was hard to tell since their outlines came in and out of sight, but there seemed to be about ten bunched up in total.

“Those are the riesefalke eggs,” Eckhart said while pointing into the water. “You must gather one yourself so as to avoid mana contamination, the same as the other ingredients. I imagine that you understand this by now.”

“I do,” I replied with a nod. “But am I going to have to dive into the spring? It looks really hot.”

I couldn’t give any exact figures since I didn’t have a thermometer, but the heat coming off the water was enough for me to know it was much hotter than the baths I usually took.

“Not as it is now, of course,” Eckhart said bemusedly, removing his gauntlets and tossing them to Damuel before putting on some leather gloves for blocking mana. He then reached into the pouch Ferdinand had thrown to him and took out a bag-shaped net tied shut, inside of which were many feystones—likely the empty ones Ferdinand had spoken of previously. At first glance, they looked a lot like those oranges you’d see bunched together in mesh bags at grocery stores.

Eckhart wrapped the string dangling from the top of the net around his wrist, then pulled out a feystone slightly larger than a fist from within and tossed it toward the eggs. I heard a thunk, at which point he started walking into the spring with the bag of feystones still tied to his wrist.

“Eckhart?”

“The feystones are absorbing the heat. You should be able to enter now. Come, Rozemyne.”

I experimentally dipped my fingers into the spring at Eckhart’s encouragement. Lo and behold, it was now about as warm as an extra-hot

bath.

Wowee! Feystones sure are something else.

“The spring’s temperature will only remain lowered while the feystones are absorbing the mana. Once they are filled, the temperature will rise again.”

I stood in place, hesitant to enter while still wearing my clothes, which prompted Eckhart to heft me up and climb in himself. The water got up to my head in no time, and as I couldn’t feel the ground beneath me, I started clinging to Eckhart.

I have to say... aahh... the heat actually feels pretty good.

The temperature was perfect, but my floating clothes were getting in the way of me letting out a satisfied sigh. A part of me wanted to strip naked to do this, but my social status wouldn’t exactly allow that. Plus, the heat rising again once the feystones were full of mana meant that I probably couldn’t stay inside the spring for very long anyway.

What a shame...

We waded close to where the eggs were, the water now reaching Eckhart’s shoulders.

“Rozemyne, I will duck down and pull you underwater. Grab the egg the moment you can.”

“Okay.”

“Take a deep breath, and...”

A second later, Eckhart crouched, bringing me all the way down to his feet. I was completely engulfed in the hot water. It was whitish and a bit cloudy, forming a hard-to-see-through haze, but I was still able to reach out and grab the egg closest to me. It felt about as big as I assumed an ostrich egg would be, meaning I needed to use both hands to hold it.

On inspection, the egg seemed to be marble-colored and definitely didn’t look like something I would want to eat. Not that they were food anyway.

Okay! Gathering complete.

I turned around and nodded at Eckhart, who tensed his hands beneath my arms and started pulling me back to the surface. That was when I spotted something approaching us underwater. It seemed to be following me up.

When my head was above the water and I could breathe again, I saw a

small monkey timidly swimming over, looking at us with wide, docile eyes.

A baby monkey...?

Just as I was starting to think it was cute, however, its eyes flashed and its arms shot toward the riesefalke egg in my hands.

"Rozemyne!" Eckhart yelled, pulling me up just in time for the monkey's paws to miss. "That is known as a bataffe. This time, do whatever you can to stop the egg from being stolen! It is hardly a strong feybeast, but we cannot kill it here," he repeated, scooping me up under his left arm while using his right to push aside the water as he strode back toward the edge of the spring. "Bataffes travel in groups. If you see one, assume there are thirty nearby!"

Wouldn't that make them like my archnemeses from my Urano days, the nuclear-resistant bugs of evil and horror?

Eckhart's warning made my disgust toward bataffes explode, and at the same time, I remembered how the ruelle fruit filled with my mana had been stolen in the past.

I'm not giving this up... It's my very own hot spring egg!

I tightly hugged the egg to my chest while glaring at the bataffe. Its face twisted with anger at having failed to snatch it from me, and it started swimming toward Eckhart and me while gnashing its teeth. Not a shred of its former cuteness remained.

"Scree! Scree!" it shrieked, trying to sound as intimidating as possible as it violently clawed at the water to reach us. The fact that it wasn't giving up just made me more and more frustrated.

"This one's *mine*!"

The bataffe let out another hostile screech and reached out its arms yet again, but this time it wasn't aiming for the egg—it was trying to attack me. I protectively hugged the egg and allowed my anger to flare, hitting the feybeast with my mana and Crushing it. Perhaps it hadn't anticipated the surprise attack—or a mana attack at all, for that matter—as its eyes shot wide open in response. I could tell from its frozen expression that my victory was assured.

Eheheh! Surprised, huh? Well, I'm something of a fighter myself. And don't you forget it!

I smugly looked down at the bataffe, only to see that it was now floating on its back and frothing at the mouth.

Oh no... Did I go too far?!

I anxiously scanned our surroundings and saw a group of enraged bataffes, baring their teeth as they leaped into the hot spring from an entrance opposite the hole we had come in through. An even closer look revealed there were also multiple shadows under the water racing this way.

“Eckhart! There’s a swarm of bataffes coming!”

“I expected as much.”

“Lord Eckhart, the riesefalke has returned!” Damuel shouted, pointing up from where he was keeping watch. I followed his finger to see a fairly large, predatory-looking bird rapidly descending from a hole high up in the chasm. It had legs that were unusually thick for a bird its size, dagger-like claws, and sharp eyes that were locked onto its prey—us.

The riesefalke diving at us seemed far more deadly than the eiderots Ferdinand was holding back or the bataffes rushing our way. And since I had its egg in my hands, it had identified *me* as an enemy. I swallowed hard as it lunged straight toward me.

“Ngh!”

Eckhart let out a loud grunt, swinging his free right hand to grab a bataffe and throwing it at the riesefalke as hard as he could.

“Bwughhauh!” I spluttered. As I was still under Eckhart’s arm, the sudden movement simultaneously resulted in me being dunked under the water. The riesefalke had dodged the bataffe and flown back up for safety, though, so I wouldn’t hold it against him—not that I was really in a position to complain in the first place.

The inside of my nose really stings, but you know what? I’m willing to forgive him.

The riesefalke stared down from its position high in the air, comparing Eckhart and me—who were now safely on land—with the shrieking bataffes kicking and splashing on the water’s surface as they began their retreat. Its sights soon locked on the bataffes aiming for the other eggs, and it began its descent once again.

Once he was back on land, Eckhart tossed me into my highbeast while I coughed with water leaking from my nose, along with the feystone-containing mesh purse and his leather gloves. No sooner was I inside than he barked “Run!” and dashed away himself, putting back on the gauntlets Damuel had brought to him.

This wasn’t exactly the time to sit still and rub my hurting nose, so I stuffed the egg into my own leather bag and hurriedly gripped the steering wheel again. My seatbelt could wait—time was running out.

Brigitte gestured for us to follow her back into the narrow corridor, which she had been guarding for us in the meantime, and we rushed through to return to Ferdinand. He was now maintaining multiple Schutzaria shields to contain five eiderots at once, and it appeared that those stuck inside the same shield were attacking one another. It had required my complete focus to capture a single goltze back in the day, but here he was containing five separate feybeasts at once with a cool, composed expression.

“Status?” Ferdinand asked, having noticed us running his way. Brigitte, who was in the lead, immediately responded that the mission had been a success.

“The riesefalke returned to the spring. We fled after determining that its attention had shifted to the bataffes stealing its other eggs, but it did see

Rozemyne with one," Eckhart added once he had caught up. "There is a possibility it will come after us."

Upon hearing that, Ferdinand furrowed his brow and turned his gaze to the corridor. "It is all but guaranteed that it can smell the mana from all of these shields. We would be wise to retreat at once before it comes to investigate. I shall remain here and contain the eiderots until the very last moment. Go!"

"Yes, sir!" Eckhart said with a nod, taking the lead and dashing for the exit.

Ferdinand would be guarding our rear after keeping the eiderots contained. We had taken several small breaks on our walk here, but now we would have to sprint back without any at all. That wasn't an issue for me since I was riding in my highbeast, but nobody else was quite so fortunate; they had to run themselves, since the corridors were too narrow for me to expand my highbeast and let them in.

"Will you be okay, Brigitte? I wish I could let you ride with me."

"I am beneath your worry, milady."

"Enough chatter. You are only wasting your energy," Ferdinand barked from behind us.

Brigitte and I exchanged a quick glance, then promptly shut our mouths and kept running to the exit.

Only when we had nearly escaped did Ferdinand determine that we were safe from being followed and allow us to stop. While I was blowing my nose and wiping my face, everyone else decided that if we were going to rest anyway, we might as well press forward a little longer and eat lunch outside. And so, we washed the eye drops out of our eyes with cleansing magic and continued heading for the exit. The knights were all breathing heavily, which was no surprise considering how far they had run without any breaks.

Once outside, the color of the world changed dramatically. The bright sun illuminated a dazzling stretch of green as far as the eye could see, with the sky above similarly bursting with color. It was still a hot summer day, but the air was crisp without the stench of sulfur overpowering our senses. That alone was more than I ever could have asked for.

Now that we were no longer restricted by the tight space inside the

chasm, everyone summoned their highbeasts and we flew to camp.

When we arrived, I napped in my Pandabus while everyone else was preparing rations and boiling water for our slightly late lunch. It seemed that, thanks to me having stayed in my wet clothes during our long escape, I had caught a cold in the blink of an eye. My head was all fuzzy, and while Brigitte used cleansing magic on me and changed my clothes, my chilly shakes weren't going anywhere. My neck twitched, and I could feel goosebumps spread across my entire body.

"Here, Rozemyne. Eat. You cannot drink potions on an empty stomach," Ferdinand said, holding out more of the rations we had eaten that morning. I wasn't particularly hungry, but I knew that I wouldn't get better without a potion, so I took a defeated bite.

For some reason, it tasted better than it had earlier. It was somewhat like thick porridge, and maybe due to how terrible I was feeling at the moment, it was actually delicious.

"Strange... These rations taste better than they did this morning."

"Did I not say that you used too much warm water? Your rations were half the size of ours, and yet you used the same amount as us. Of course the flavor would be diluted."

"Oh, that's what you meant. That's why I was so confused—I was sure I'd used the same amount of water as everyone else. I guess the reason it tastes good now is because you're the one who made it, Ferdinand. I thank you ever so much," I said with a dopey smile.

He offered no more than a tired sigh in response and started eating his own food.

"Ah— *ACHOO*!"

"This is not a problem; I anticipated that you would get sick," Ferdinand said as he took out the excessively bitter potion and forced me to drink it.

As far as I was concerned, something being expected didn't make it *not* a problem, but I didn't have the energy to protest. I was just too tired.

Now looking so sickly that anyone could surely see I had a fever at a glance, I made Lessy big enough for everyone to sleep inside him. With that done, I promptly reclined the driver's seat and collapsed onto it.

"Does this help at all, Lady Rozemyne?" Brigitte asked with a worried expression, placing a towel that had been chilled in the icebox across my forehead. Her kindness washed over me like a gentle wave. A thoughtful

act like that was something neither Ferdinand with his potions nor Bonifatius with his barking about weakness would ever think to do.

“Eckhart, where is the leather bag?”

“Pardon me, Lord Ferdinand. It is right there.”

Ferdinand retrieved the gloves and small feystone pouch that were inside Lessy, then tossed them to Eckhart and told him to clean them up. His eyes then came to rest on my leather belt, which was resting on the passenger’s seat. He undid the gathering bag from it and held it toward me.

“You will be unable to move until the potion takes effect. For this reason, you might as well clutch the riesefalke egg while you sleep. Considering the mana-rich environment your highbeast produces, it shouldn’t take long at all to dye.”

I took the bag from Ferdinand, sighing at the fact that he would demand efficiency even from a sick person, and removed the egg from it. “I guess this just leaves the ruelle fruit in autumn. Ferdinand, let’s get it for sure this time,” I said, frowning a little in frustration as I remembered last year’s failure.

Ferdinand returned a grimace himself and glared at me. “Of course. I will not fail a second time. Rest well now so that you are prepared for when the time comes. We cannot do anything until you have recovered.”

“Right. Goodnight.”

That night, I fell asleep while hugging the riesefalke egg and pouring my mana into it. When I awoke, my fever was gone and the egg had turned into a blue feystone.

Hand Pumps

Having completed the summer gathering without issue, we returned to the temple, where I stayed in bed until my fever finally went down.

When I discussed my schedule with Fran the next morning, he delivered the bad news that there was a ton to do—both Ferdinand and me being away for so many days, on top of me ending up bedridden, had resulted in a load of work piling up.

“It’s unfortunate that just a few days of absence leads to such a buildup,” I said with a sigh. “Hopefully it won’t be long before Kampfer and Frietack are able to handle Ferdinand’s work for him.”

Damuel shook his head with a bemused smile. “Lady Rozemyne, I believe that is too tall of an order... Not even other nobles can easily accomplish what Lord Ferdinand does.”

“True. I definitely wouldn’t be pleased if someone told me I needed to take his place somewhere.”

Covering for Ferdinand obviously wasn’t something a single person could do, which was why we needed to train a group of people who would divide the workload among themselves such that the temple could operate without us. And now that Ferdinand had returned to noble society, it was clear as day that he would be leaving the temple more often than ever to do things like visit the castle.

Benno and Mark were coming from the Plantin Company today, so I went to the orphanage director’s chambers with Fran, Monika, and Nicola right after lunch. It was only when I placed my hand on the door, pouring mana into it so that preparations could be made inside, that I realized something terrible.

Oh no! Gil isn’t here!

Out of all my attendants, only Gil and Fran knew about my commoner past and relationship with Benno’s squad, meaning they were the only ones I could drop the noblewoman act in front of. Fran, however, seemed to have some very bad memories of the hidden room and stiffened whenever we got

near it. I knew he would steel his resolve and enter if asked, but I didn’t want to put him in that situation.

“Lady Rozemyne, will we not be preparing the hidden room?” he asked curiously when I drew back my hand.

I faltered for a moment, then disguised my hesitation with a smile. “I was just thinking... you know, why not converse out here today?”

“...I will accompany you inside in Gil’s place.”

“I appreciate the thought, Fran, but you don’t need to force yourself,” I replied with a shake of my head, but Fran continued with a calm facade that made it clear he was indeed going to force himself.

“Lady Rozemyne, this may inconvenience you, but I ask that you help me conquer my fears. You are doing your best to be the archduke’s adopted daughter, and as your head attendant, I cannot allow myself to remain stuck in my ways forever. I wish to overcome my trauma.”

Had Fran been insisting for my sake, I could have just ordered him to stop. But now that he was asking for my help, well... I couldn’t say no.

“In that case, I shall help you. But if you begin feeling unwell, I ask that you tell me immediately. You need not force yourself; it wouldn’t be too much of an inconvenience for us to hold our meeting outside the hidden room.”

“As you wish,” Fran said, nodding with a faint smile.

Nicola cackled behind him. “It’s like your roles are somehow reversed here.”

To ensure I wasn’t in the way while the hidden room was being cleaned, I was served my tea at a table outside and facing away from the door. Some documents had been prepared as well, so it seemed there was work for me to do in the meantime, but I glanced back to take a peek every time I sipped my drink.

Monika pushed the door wide open and stepped through, with Nicola following close behind. Fran, however, stopped just outside. As expected, he really didn’t look too good.

I anxiously continued to watch him when, all of a sudden, he turned back to me, perhaps having felt my gaze. He gave a slight smile when our eyes met.

“I believe I shall be just fine, Lady Rozemyne.”

Fran looked stiff and pale as he stepped into the hidden room himself,

but once inside, his normal expression returned. He cleaned and started preparing tea, looking totally calm all the while, but I knew he was good at hiding his emotions. Maybe he was just desperately masking how much he was hurting inside. I leaned over the back of my chair to watch him as he cleaned and brought in sweets.

Eventually, we made eye contact again. This time, he smiled like he was holding back laughter.

"I truly am fine."

Hm... He's not forcing himself, is he? Is heee?

I narrowed my eyes and kept watching him suspiciously, but before I knew it, Fritz—who had been standing by at the gate—was guiding Benno and Mark into my chambers. Once we had exchanged noble greetings and were making our way into the hidden room, I turned my head to check on Fran, but he simply placed his hands on my shoulders and said, "You must keep looking ahead." That was how he always acted.

Mm? I guess he really is okay.

He served tea to Benno and the others, his expression remaining unchanged despite being inside the hidden room. When I sipped my own tea, it tasted the same as always—no imperfections born from fear or anxiety.

"This is just a message from Zack," Benno began, "but he's finished a prototype for that well pump thing. I dunno what it's for, but I'm guessing it's another one of your weird inventions?"

"Wait, he finished a *prototype*? Not just the schematics?" I asked, blinking in surprise.

Benno rubbed his chin, allowing his eyes to wander a little as he tried to remember exactly what Zack had said. "He designed it using the principles you told him about, but he wasn't sure whether it would actually be able to draw water, so he just up and made one. I hear he's already put it on the Verde Workshop's well and has made a few revisions."

"That must mean it won't take long at all to spread the hand pumps everywhere. I want to share the schematics with the Smithing Guild so that all smiths everywhere can make them. It'd bring in too much profit for a single workshop to monopolize, and drawing water sucks for everyone, so I want there to be a pump on every well in the lower city as soon as possible."

I had asked Zack to make the schematics as simple as he could. There was still one part so precise that only Johann could make it, but in general unless the hand pumps were quick and relatively easy to make, they wouldn't catch on at all.

"You're seriously doing this again...?! Come on! Think of the profits!"

"Oh, but I am. I may be trusting the schematics to the Smithing Guild, but I won't be letting them spread the hand pumps for free. I intend to sign a magic contract with them such that Zack and I get paid for each one—him for designing it, and me for coming up with the idea. The contract will also say that the Smithing Guild has to pay a similar fee if the schematics are ever used without permission."

"Huh, alright. So the plan's to have the Smithing Guild take total responsibility for the pumps throughout the city," Benno said, sounding satisfied now that he knew I wasn't just giving the pumps away. Implementing a system where I charged a fee for the use of my schematics would also help pave the way for the copyright system I intended to put into place later.

I have my own secret plots and ambitions, you know. Eheheh.

"And that's that, Benno. Can I ask you to make the magic contract with the Smithing Guild for me? I'll cover the costs, of course."

Benno blinked at me in utter confusion, then massaged his temples as if attempting to ease a splitting headache. "Hold on a second, that's one large-scale magic contract. It doesn't make any sense for me to handle it when I'm not even involved here."

"I suppose, but you're the only person I know who's used to making magic contracts."

Benno had sorted out every magic contract I had signed thus far; he was the only person I could go to about making the one I needed for my business.

"Don't ask me. Ask your adoptive father."

"Hm? Sylvester?"

"All magic contracts have to go through the archduke first anyway. Not to mention, if you want to popularize something new, you'll want to start at the top of the social hierarchy, right? Wouldn't things end badly if nobles found out you started this trend among commoners?"

"Good point..." I replied. I could already imagine Elvira getting mad and

Sylvester poking my cheek, asking why I had hidden something so interesting from him.

“If you’re going to take the lead with this, you’ll want to go with the duchy-wide magic contracts that nobles use, not the city-wide ones we merchants use. This’ll help intimidate the Smithing Guild into cooperating. Things will also go a lot smoother if you give a pump to the archduke first. That should give him a good impression of Zack and the Smithing Guild,” Benno explained. It seemed that he had offered up some plant paper to Sylvester for this very reason when reporting the magic contract.

“If that’s how merchants do things, then I think I should follow your advice. Okay. Go ahead and tell Zack to make a hand pump for me to give to Sylvester. And while you’re at it, you might want to give the Smithing Guild some notice about this, since its head will need to come to the castle to sign the contract if everything goes to plan. I’ll schedule an audience with Sylvester through Ferdinand.”

Zack and Johann started working on a new pump as soon as they heard about our plans from Benno, apparently weeping at the thought of making something directly for the archduke. Meanwhile, I reported that the hand pump prototype had been completed to Ferdinand, who promptly took me to his hidden room and scolded me to no end, demanding to know why this was the first he was hearing about them.

“I was going to tell you once the schematics were complete, but they went ahead and made a prototype on the spot. It won’t have much to do with nobles directly, since it’s just a tool to make drawing water easier, but I think commoners will really appreciate it.”

I covered for myself even further by explaining my plan to profit from the pumps and the details of the magic contract I had just discussed with Benno, then I asked him to arrange a meeting with Sylvester for me.

“Benno told me that using a noble’s duchy-wide magic contract instead of a merchant’s one would make it easier to spread the pumps, so I would like to schedule an audience with Sylvester. The plan is for there to be four signatures: mine, for obvious reasons; yours, because you’re my guardian; Zack’s, because he designed it; and the head of the Smithing Guild’s, because he’ll be managing the schematics.”

“This certainly does seem to be significantly large-scale. But before I

speak of this to Sylvester, I would like to see for myself just what kind of tool this is. Instruct the Smithing Guild to show me a prototype before progressing things further."

"Okay."

No sooner had I passed this request onto Benno than it was decided the secondary prototype planned to be attached to the well by Johann's workshop would be brought to the temple right away. Zack and Johann were apparently going to explain how it worked while putting it into place.

"Now then, this is the well you are going to install the pump onto," I said, at which point the group of smiths sent from the guild silently got to work setting it up. Everyone looked too afraid to speak. I grabbed Johann's arm as he tried to slide away into the group, and took Zack's trembling hand as he stood frozen in place with the schematics.

"Ferdinand, these are two of my Gutenbergs. They are smiths who have designed and crafted many tools essential to the printing process," I said, puffing my chest out with pride. The two smiths in question immediately froze in place, fear and confusion plastered onto their wide-eyed faces as Ferdinand looked down at them with an exceedingly sympathetic look.

"...I imagine the road ahead will not be easy with Rozemyne dragging you about, but stay strong, you two."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"I believe she said you have the schematics? Show me."

Zack spread open the schematics with still trembling hands and explained to Ferdinand the principles behind the hand pump's operation. He was trying his best, speaking as politely as he could manage, though he had to keep biting his tongue and messed up his grammar a few times in the process. Johann—an even worse speaker—used that opportunity to slide away and quietly help the other craftsmen with their work.

"Fascinating... Moving this lever like so will cause this valve to open, then? How does that work?" Ferdinand asked. Since he was a researcher at heart, the previously unknown physics principles at work in this new tool were making him livelier than ever.

Zack continued to stammer his way through the questions, but it wasn't long before he became overwhelmed. "Erm, it's important to make a... well, Lady Rozemyne used the term 'vacuum' here... So you need to make a

vacuum, and... You see, she explained it all to me and, um... she told me to make it as simple as possible. This one part can only be made by, um, someone with Johann’s level of skill, since there can’t be any gaps, but... A-Anyway, I think you’ll need to ask Lady Rozemyne how it really works!”

It seemed that he had finally given up, instead throwing the ball into my court—not that I had enough knowledge to withstand Ferdinand’s barrage of questions either.

“It’s ready, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Ah, right. Add the priming water and work the pump.”

Johann did as instructed and started pumping the handle. After several pumps, water began gushing out of the spout and into the bucket.

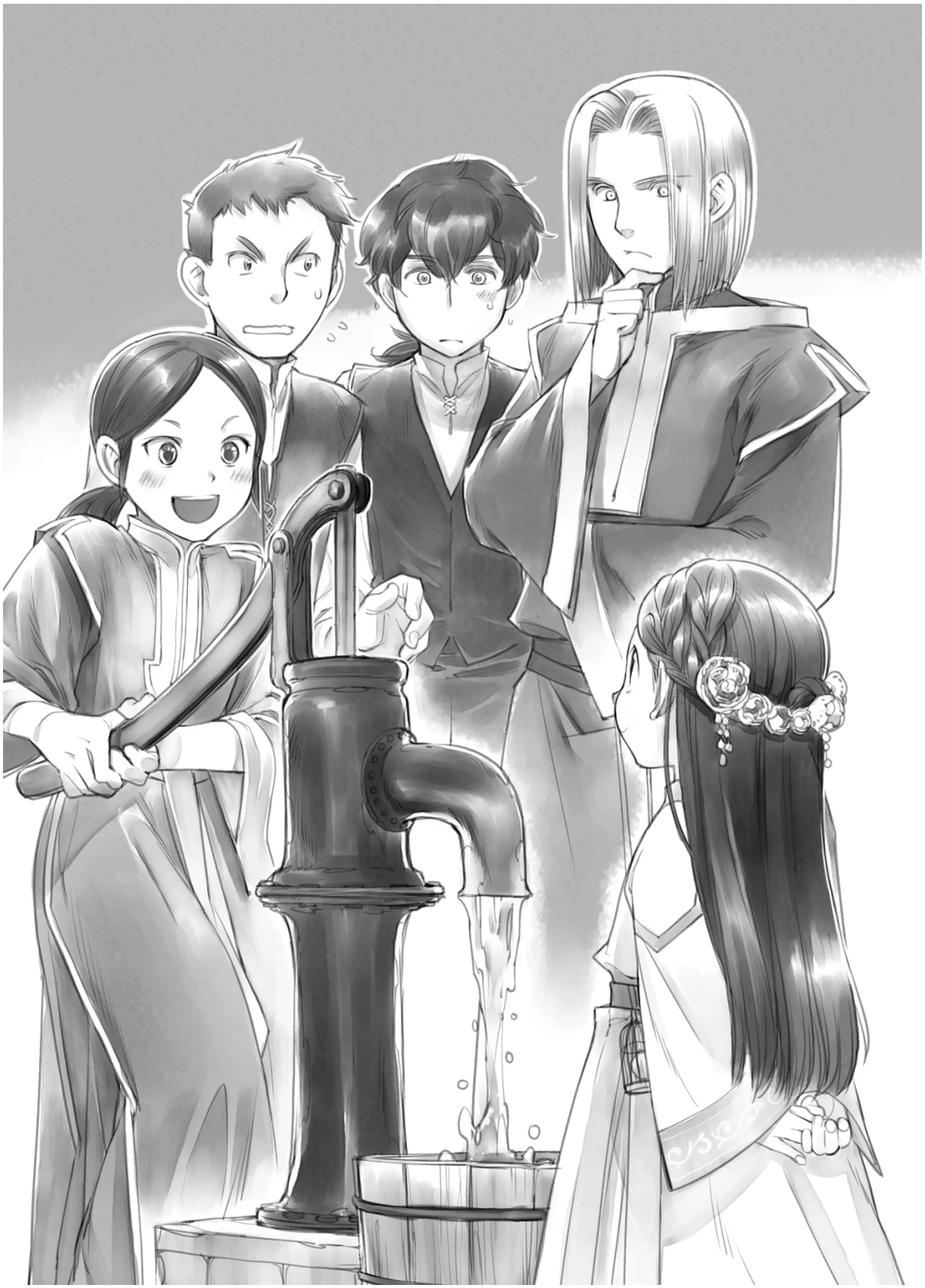
“Oh...?” Ferdinand seemed to be impressed.

“This will make drawing water much easier. And while we’re here, let’s have a girl try using it. Monika, draw some water using the pump, if you will.”

“U-Understood. Right away.”

Monika, looking a little nervous now that everyone’s eyes were on her, stood behind the pump and gripped its handle. This time, water poured out almost immediately on the first down stroke. She let go in surprise, her eyes wide as she looked between the bucket, the pump, and her hand, then looked at the craftsmen with visible awe and respect.

“I can’t believe it comes out so easily... This is incredible. Drawing water is just so easy.”



Seeing that, Ferdinand gave a nod. “I see. This is a splendid invention—one that the archduke will certainly need to hear about. Craft a hand pump worthy of being gifted to him. In the meantime, I shall arrange the audience,” he said, his tone conveying more force than praise.

Zack and Johann, already feeling the pressure, nodded over and over again before leaving the temple with pale faces.

Once we had settled on a date for the audience, I sent a message through Benno to the Smithing Guild. In it, I said that on the day, they would need to come to the temple after second bell, when the workshop opened. The fact that I was going to be with the High Priest would probably make them nervous, but there wouldn’t be any unreasonable scholars there to force demands on them; they could relax and come without having to worry about their futures.

The message went through, and on the day of, a nervous-looking Zack and an older-looking man—the head of the Smithing Guild—came wearing their best clothes. With them were several equally anxious-looking craftsmen, here to attach the pump made for the archduke.

“It looks a little too large to be carried comfortably in a carriage,” I said. “Shall we use my highbeast?”

“Highbeasts exist for travel, not for carrying luggage. But I imagine nothing I say will change your mind,” Ferdinand said exasperatedly. “In any case, I suppose that transporting it in your highbeast would not be the end of the world, since this is a high-quality product being offered to Aub Ehrenfest.”

He was the last person I wanted to hear complain about putting luggage in a highbeast, especially given how much he’d loaded into my Pandabus during our trip to Mount Lohenberg. I decided to let it slide, though.

Now that I had Ferdinand’s permission, I brought out Lessy and had the craftsmen put the pump inside. I decided to let them all ride with me as well, and after uneasily looking my highbeast over, they climbed in with fearful expressions.

I can guess it’s scary to ride with a noble, but just hold on for a little while.

Fran walked through the Pandabus, instructing the craftsmen how to fasten their seatbelts before climbing out. “Farewell, Lady Rozemyne. Farewell, High Priest. I await your safe return.”

And so, we flew to the castle with Damuel taking the lead on his highbeast. As we were visiting for an official audience this time, rather than me returning home, I traveled low over the road for carriages and landed at the front entrance.

“We are here for the audience with Aub Ehrenfest. This thing we have is an offering for him. Have them set it up by the well closest to the archduke’s office,” Ferdinand instructed the scholar-official waiting for us right inside.

Since Ferdinand had made the arrangements himself as the archduke’s half-brother, we were taken straight to the waiting room, while the accompanying craftsmen took the pump and followed the scholar to the well.

“You two just need to kneel quietly during the audience,” I said to Zack and the head of the Smithing Guild. “Ferdinand and I will do all the talking.”

“As you wish,” they replied, placing their hands on their chests in relief. I could sympathize with their terror, as craftsmen would never have an audience with the archduke himself under normal circumstances, but they needed to be here for the magic contract; we couldn’t exactly call the archduke down to the lower city.

It’ll all be over soon. I promise.

We were let into the archduke’s office without having to wait long at all. Sylvester welcomed us with a very stern, archduke-like expression, but his dark-green eyes were sparkling with curiosity and excitement over this new invention. I definitely wasn’t imagining it.

“I heard you have an offering for me?”

“Yes. Rozemyne and her personnel known as ‘Gutenbergs’ would like to offer up a hand pump,” Ferdinand explained, likewise speaking in a polite and formal tone. “It is a tool that makes drawing water significantly easier, and as we speak, one is being set up by one of the castle’s nearby wells.”

This was a surface-level exchange being made purely for the sake of appearances, as Ferdinand had reported this all to Sylvester already.

“If possible, I would like to spread these pumps all throughout Ehrenfest,” I said. “As a magic contract for merchants would not be enough to accomplish this, I ask to use one of yours, Aub Ehrenfest.”

“...You are none other than my own adopted daughter, but even then, I

must see this pump for myself before I make a decision. I show no favoritism, not even to family," Sylvester replied with a small frown. In reality, his eyes were just demanding that I hurry up and show him the pump.

Well, I don't mind... but I wonder what everyone else thinks.

In truth, it was incredibly rude to send the archduke to the well; it was located in a cranny on the ground that required one to pass through the basement, which was not a place for nobles to go. While that wasn't really an issue to Sylvester, who had once snuck out of the Noble's Quarter to hunt in the lower city's forest, it was still important that he maintain the air and dignity of an archduke.

I glanced over at Ferdinand, who nodded to signal that he had expected this before voicing his own thoughts. "I believe you will understand why this magic contract is essential once you see the pump. We apologize greatly for the rudeness, Aub Ehrenfest, but we humbly ask that you accompany us to the well."

"Hm. If you insist, I shall deign to accompany you and see this tool firsthand. Take me there at once," Sylvester said. He looked thoroughly displeased at the idea of walking there himself, but the subtle spring in his step suggested otherwise.

We all headed to the castle well, with Sylvester's guard knights and scholars following along behind.

"Here is the pump, my lord."

By the time we arrived, the craftsmen had finished putting the pump into place, and we could see castle servants crying out in surprise while working the handle. These servants scattered like baby spiders upon seeing us, while the craftsmen stepped back and kneeled.

Sylvester stood in front of the craftsmen and looked at the pump. "Is this it?"

"It is. Zack, show him how to use it, if you would."

Sylvester leaned forward with fascination as Zack gave a demonstration, no doubt dying to try out the pump himself. But as the archduke, he absolutely couldn't be seen drawing water; we were already significantly pushing it just having him come out to see how it was used and confirm its value. He knew this, and so despite the impatient look creeping onto his face, he didn't even ask.

“...I determine your request for a magic contract to be well and true. Dedicate yourselves to spreading this pump mechanism throughout the duchy,” Sylvester eventually said, his restless frown instead coming across as a deeply thoughtful look of consideration. For a second, he actually looked like a wise archduke, and judging by how moved Zack and the head of the Smithing Guild seemed to be, they had been completely fooled.

Once we had completed the magic contract, Sylvester and I signed our names with the pen that used mana, while Zack and the head of the Smithing Guild used the special ink that was standard for merchant magic contracts before stamping their signatures with blood.

No sooner had Zack stamped his name than the magic contract was enveloped in golden flames and disappeared. His eyes opened wide and he yelled in shock before hurriedly covering his mouth.

“The magic contract is now in place,” I announced. “I hope the hand pump spreads throughout the duchy and makes it easier for everyone to draw water.”

And so, it came to pass that every pump made henceforth would have my and Zack’s names engraved onto it to clearly identify us as the creators —a necessary development due to the contract stating we were to be paid a fee for each one made.

Georgine’s Visit

Third bell rang, signaling the end of my harspiel practice. I packed up and went to help Ferdinand with his work as usual, but as soon as I entered his chambers, he looked at me with an exceedingly stern frown.

“Rozemyne.”

“Yes?” I asked, tilting my head gracefully.

Ferdinand jutted his chin toward the fearsome lecture room. I couldn’t recall doing anything that would anger him, but the look in his eyes and his silent gesture were nothing if not expressions of cold anger.

I was struck with the urge to apologize on the spot—or really, the urge to bolt right out of the room. I slowly looked up at Fran for help, my neck almost audibly creaking with fear, only for him to sadly shake his head.

Nooo! Someone! Anyone! Help meee!

As I tearfully entered the lecture room, literally everyone avoided meeting my gaze.

The moment Ferdinand and I were seated facing one another, he glared at me with his golden eyes. He was not pleased *at all*. I inhaled sharply and straightened my back.

“Now then, Rozemyne—you told me nothing of this, but it seems that Sylvester’s older sister will be arriving from Ahrensbach at the end of summer, hm?”

“Oh...? Did I not tell you?”

“No. You did not. Despite this being exceedingly important.”

“Ngh... I’m sorry.”

I went ahead and told Ferdinand what Sylvester had told me upon his and Florencia’s return—namely that my response announcing the former High Bishop’s death to a letter I received had resulted in Sylvester getting harassed all throughout the Archduke Conference, and that his older sister would now be coming to Ehrenfest to visit her uncle’s grave.

“Hold it. Why was she at the Archduke Conference?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’? She’s the older of Sylvester’s two sisters

and the one who married Ahrensbach's archduke, right? Florencia went with Sylvester, so doesn't it make sense that his older sister would come from Ahrensbach?" I asked, not understanding the question.

Ferdinand slowly shook his head. "She became the third wife of Ahrensbach's archduke, and as the Archduke Conference is always attended by first wives, it is unusual that she would be there. I do not believe she attended last year, which is precisely why we were able to conceal the Bezewanst incident from her, despite it having happened during the conference."

It seemed to be that only the archduke's first wife was allowed to assist the archduke and get involved in political matters. Second wives and below could at times help the first wife, assuming they were on good terms, but they couldn't get involved in politics themselves. These customs were in place to avoid there being too many cooks in the kitchen, so to speak.

"Oh, I see..." I said. "That makes sense."

"You don't understand at all, do you?"

"No, I do. I understand what you're implying here."

Up to this point, Sylvester's older sister had been unable to get involved in Ahrensbach politics due to being the archduke's third wife. But her attending the Archduke Conference this year was a sign that she had somehow supplanted the archduke's first wife.

"...I'm just not sure how the situation will change because of that."

"And that is why I said you do not understand at all. For better or worse, direct familial ties hold significant influence in politics; an archducal couple is always liable to be swayed by their family. Sylvester's other sister was married into Frenbeltag in the west, and Florencia hails from Frenbeltag herself. As both rulers of the duchy and elder siblings, they have recently had a considerable influence on our own archducal couple. You are aware of this, I believe."

"Yes. They pushed a number of small chalices onto us," I replied, recalling that our archducal couple were weak to Frenbeltag's archducal couple—that is, their older brother and sister.

"But the situation with Frenbeltag is far from terrible," Ferdinand continued. "They suffered massive losses from being wrapped up in the civil war, and since we are offering them our support, we are putting them somewhat in our debt. Ahrensbach, however, is another story. It is a greater

duchy—a large and populous duchy compared to medial and lesser duchies—that chose the winning side of the civil war. If Sylvester's oldest sister is now the first wife of Ahrensbach's archduke, we will receive significantly more political pressure from them. Not only would it be incomparable to the sway Frenbeltag has on us, but we would be in no position to refuse them," he murmured.

It seemed that Ferdinand was much more focused on the problems that lay ahead than I was. I knew a little more about the power balance between us and the surrounding duchies now, but I still didn't quite grasp what exactly would change within Ehrenfest.

"What kind of person is Sylvester's eldest sister, exactly? I don't even know her name."

"Her name is Georgine. Before Sylvester was born, she was widely expected to become the archduchess of Ehrenfest."

"I know that much. She wrote all about it in the letters that Bezewanst had stashed away."

"...I do not recall being told about such letters," Ferdinand said, glaring at me while rubbing his twitching temple.

"Um, well... I thought they were love letters, so I decided it'd be best to leave them be," I replied falteringly.

"Fool! Do not hide the affairs of convicted criminals! Do you wish to be charged along with them as a co-conspirator?!"

"I'm sorry!"

Ferdinand immediately unleashed his fury on me; love letters were apparently even *more* important for me to report. I slumped my shoulders sadly as I was lectured at length about the dangers of me being charged for hiding evidence, and so on and so forth.

"Good grief... To my knowledge, Georgine was wed to Ahrensbach because Sylvester's grandmother on his mother's side was the daughter of an archduke there. Truth be told... I know little about Georgine herself. She was already wed and gone by the time I started living in the castle."

According to what I knew from Sylvester, she was the kind of person to hold a grudge and antagonize others over matters that had taken place years and years prior. I knew she was the poster child for why one should truly avoid getting wrapped up in sibling rivalries, but I wasn't sure whether she was only like that toward Sylvester because he took the seat of archduke

from her, or whether she was like that to everyone.

“I have seen her once. It was during Father’s... rather, during the previous archduke’s funeral. She attended, but I saw her only from a distance, and we did not exchange any greetings.”

“Wait, really? But why?” I asked, blinking in surprise. Georgine had come as the wife of another duchy’s archduke and a daughter of the deceased. I had to go through countless formal greetings at every event just as the archduke’s adopted daughter, so as her half-brother, I expected that Ferdinand would have at least greeted her.

“I entered the temple due to Sylvester’s mother shortly before the prior archduke’s death, and thus attended the funeral as a member of the temple. I was not there as a family member, and naturally, her status put her above greeting a mere blue priest. That is all there was to it,” Ferdinand said dryly.

I could imagine him having to watch his father be buried from afar, unable to attend as a family member. It pained my heart, and I balled my hands into tight fists on my lap.

“Doesn’t that mean you didn’t even get to participate in your own father’s funeral as his son?”

“Yes. What of it?” Ferdinand replied, raising an eyebrow like it was nothing at all.

“How can you act so indifferent about this?!” I shouted, unable to help myself. “You feel so disconnected from the rest of your family, but you called him ‘Father’! The previous archduke had to have been someone really important to you, Ferdinand, and I know it! Why are you acting so calm?! You have the right to be angry about not being allowed to visit the funeral as his son! You have the right to cry about it!”

“...Putting aside whether or not I have the right to be annoyed, why are you yourself angry? It has nothing to do with you,” Ferdinand said, rubbing his temples as he muttered, “I cannot comprehend why you are mad.”

“I mean, because... it’s just sad! It’s too sad... And one day, the same thing will happen to me. But I have the right to be mad—to cry about it...”

Now that my family could no longer be my family, I wouldn’t be called to attend their funerals in the lower city. Worst-case scenario, I might not even be informed of their deaths. I was completely excluded, and I wasn’t even sure whether I could pray for their happiness from where I was.

“Calm yourself, Rozemyne. Please, do not cry now, of all times. It will

look terrible when you leave.”

“Is now really the time to be worrying about appearances?! Show at least a little compassion here! Try to calm me down, or let me cry until it’s all out of my system, or *something*!” I shouted, abruptly standing up and demanding kindness.

“Good grief, you are a handful...” Ferdinand murmured, reaching out and picking me up. He set me down on his lap, gave a brief hug, and then scoffed. “That should be enough, yes?”

His haughty smirk was completely unfounded, and this hardly felt like him consoling me.

“No, it’s not enough. This doesn’t feel kind or warmhearted at all.”

“You appear to have stopped crying though, and that is enough for me. Get off.”

Not only did he ignore my frustration, but he promptly removed me from his lap. A sigh escaped me as all the energy drained from my body; no matter how mad I got, Ferdinand wouldn’t ever understand me. I climbed back onto the bench, feeling indescribably fatigued.

But it seemed that I wasn’t the only one who had lost their inertia—the anger Ferdinand had been exuding a moment ago had vanished completely, and he was now tapping his temple as if trying to remember what we had been talking about.

“We have wandered too far off topic,” he said. “Sylvester informed me that she is an exceedingly troublesome person, and thus I suggest you stay on guard when she is here.”

“What should I specifically be doing?”

“First, never be alone. Remain with your attendants and guards at all times. Go nowhere except the feast you are required to attend, and stay within the temple as much as possible,” Ferdinand said. “I cannot offer any more detailed advice, as I do not know the woman myself.”

I sighed. He wouldn’t open up about his family problems at all, but he was more than happy to talk at length when it came to warning me about nobles. He was overprotective, sure, but nowhere near kind or caring enough.

Somehow, I think I can guess why Ferdinand’s one romantic relationship didn’t last...

On a day toward the end of summer, the Noble's Gate opened wide, and several carriages passed by the temple to enter the Noble's Quarter. This happened all the time near the end of autumn as winter socializing approached, but it was an exceptionally rare sight this time of year. I saw it through a window in the High Bishop's chambers, and that was how I knew Georgine had arrived. I made sure to tell Ferdinand about it when I went to his chambers to work.

"It seems that Lady Georgine is here."

"Yes, I know. I just received an ordonnanz from Sylvester. The welcoming feast is to be held two days from now, and he wants us to gather at the castle. Make sure you are prepared," Ferdinand said with a very displeased tone, before instructing his attendants on what to do in his absence.

Likewise, I gave orders to my attendants and began preparing to go to the castle.

"Come now, milady. What outfit do you want to wear?" Rihyarda asked, launching into preparations for the feast as soon as I arrived at the castle. She was supposedly giving me a choice, but her eyes were already locked on one in particular that she had clearly set her heart on.

"You prepared these outfits for me, didn't you, Rihyarda? As I've never been to a welcoming feast for a noble from another duchy before, I would like you to choose the best one for me, if you wouldn't mind."

"As you wish. You can count on me."

Since we were nearing the end of summer, she selected an outfit that was the divine color of summer, adorned with ornaments of autumn's divine color. My hair ornament wasn't a hair stick covered with fanciful flowers like usual, but rather a light veil with neat embroidery that covered my intricately braided hair.

"Women from Ahrensbach must always wear a veil when presenting themselves in public. Veils were introduced into Ehrenfest fashion by Lord Sylvester's grandmother, who married into the duchy from Ahrensbach. At the time, there was a sizable boom of nobles wearing them," Rihyarda said with a nostalgic smile as she locked the veil into place using pins.

"If you don't mind, Rihyarda, may I ask what kind of person Lady Georgine is?"

She froze in place, her hands midway through setting the pins, and gazed around the room as she searched for the right words.

"...She is a very, very hard worker," she ultimately said with audible hesitance. It seemed to me that she sounded a little sad, too.

Soon enough, the welcoming feast began. We would be eating Georgine's old favorites and standard Ahrensbach dishes today, with my own personal recipes being banned during the event. She and Sylvester still seemed to be on bad terms, so I wondered whether this was just him hiding the new recipes from her.

The nobles gathered in the hall were largely wearing what seemed to be Ahrensbach fashion, just as Rihyarda had said. The majority of the women were wearing veils, while the men were wrapped in large, thin cloaks instead of their usual capes.

Once the archducal family—including Ferdinand and I—were in position, Georgine finally entered as the guest of the evening. She walked boldly, with a level of grace that made her high status immediately apparent, and while her hair and eye color visible through the thin veil resembled Sylvester's, her face was entirely different—she was a beautiful woman with sharp, pointed features and sculpted cheeks.

Maybe it was because Sylvester had warned me about her resentful personality, or because Rihyarda had faltered when talking about her, or even because I expected her to speak to me about what happened to Bezewanst... but whatever it was, with each step Georgine took toward us, my stomach painfully tensed up.

"Wilfried. Rozemyne. Greet the first wife of Ahrensbach," Sylvester prompted, at which point we both stepped forward to meet her. She was the daughter of the previous archduke and now first wife of a duchy that was higher ranked than Ehrenfest, so we were performing the greetings to her rather than the other way around.

"I am Wilfried, son of Aub Ehrenfest."

"I am Rozemyne, adopted daughter of Aub Ehrenfest."

"May we pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire?" we asked together after having introduced ourselves. Wilfried had complained about how hard it was for him to memorize and repeat the greeting that, up until now, he had only ever received instead of given.

“You may,” Georgine replied, her crimson lips curving into a smile.

We poured a bit of mana into our rings, finished the blessings, and then stood. Georgine’s green eyes immediately fell on Wilfried, and she looked him over carefully.

“Oh my. You truly, truly do resemble Sylvester when he was younger.”

“I look like Father?” Wilfried asked happily.

Georgine nodded with a smile. “Oh yes, quite. I could almost mistake you for him.” But despite her speaking in such a kindhearted tone, I got goosebumps all over.

I subconsciously started rubbing my wrists. Was I the only one who felt uneasy about this? As I looked around, I saw that the only other person looking uncomfortable was Sylvester; he was wearing a stony expression that showed no emotion whatsoever, which was very rare for him. Everyone else was warmly watching the conversation between Georgine and Wilfried—even Ferdinand, of all people.

“You look very beautiful, Auntie. Just like Grandmother!” Wilfried said with an innocent smile. He didn’t seem the least bit perturbed, but I was sure that Georgine’s eyebrow twitched ever so slightly at his comment.

“Oh my, is that so? I believe I’ve heard that Mother doted on you considerably.”

“That’s right!”

An instant later, Florencia stepped forward with a calm smile, moving such that she was now shielding Wilfried. “Allow me to greet you as well, Lady Georgine,” she said before kneeling down.

Sylvester, his eyes lowered somberly, also came forward to stand beside Florencia. He then gestured for Wilfried and me to step back, so we promptly cleared some space for him.

Despite both Sylvester and Georgine wearing calm noble smiles, the air between them was heavy. I could feel the friction between them even from a fair distance away, and I couldn’t help but swallow nervously.

Sylvester briefly made eye contact with Georgine, then slowly knelt as well. Her green eyes narrowed slightly beneath the thin veil as she closely watched him, and as he crossed his arms in front of his chest—a sign of humility given to one’s higher-ranking superior—her lips curved into a very satisfied grin.

“We are pleased beyond words that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads of fate tightly together and allowed us to meet once again,” he said. The archducal couple then continued their greetings, expressing their joy at her arrival and their hopes that her first visit home in such a long while would be a comfortable one.

Once they were done, Georgine beckoned me over. “Are you the High Bishop who so kindly replied to my letter?” she asked.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I nervously stepped forward. “Yes. That was me.”

“Oh, I’m very grateful that you informed me,” she said with a truly graceful smile, so strikingly beautiful that it made her seem on another level compared to all the other women present. “Sylvester has always been a lazy man; if not for you sending that letter, I am certain I would have lived out the rest of my life without hearing about this. And you are adopted, I hear. Am I right to assume he is utterly failing you as a father? To think he would force a fragile young child such as yourself to serve as the High Bishop. He surely has no understanding of just how troublesome it is being raised as a symbol. You have my sincerest sympathies.”

Even as she was dissing the heck out of Sylvester, her graceful smile didn’t falter for an instant. Maybe that was acceptable, though, since she was his sister and that much was usually expected among family. I mean, there were some parts of what she said that I could agree with a little, but he was protecting me a great deal by keeping me as his adopted daughter, so now seemed like a good time to back him up.

“It certainly is difficult serving as the High Bishop, but he assigned Ferdinand to help me as my guardian. He is very considerate and has done much in the way of supporting me.”

“My my! To think he would abandon his parental duties and entrust a child to another so soon after adopting them! I must say, I truly am ashamed to be related to him. It seems that his childhood tendency of doing nothing and forcing his work onto everyone else has not changed in the least.”

Sorry, Sylvester... My backup didn’t help at all.

“Did he at least assign a competent guardian to you? Gods above forbid that he...” she trailed off, leaving what I could assume was *“forced an incompetent buffoon to take up the position”* unsaid and instead just directing me a sympathetic look. In her mind, I had probably been targeted

for my abundance of mana, forced into an adoption, and then worked to the bone as High Bishop with an incompetent guardian barely helping out at all. Her tone of voice and the look on her face were enough for me to pick up on that.

“Lord Ferdinand is my guardian, Lady Georgine, and he is very skilled.”

“Ferdinand... I feel as though I have heard that name somewhere before,” Georgine said, turning her eyes to Sylvester. I could practically hear her say, *“You never introduced me.”*

Sylvester, still as stone-faced as before, shot Ferdinand a glance before courteously introducing him. “Sister, this is Ferdinand, my half-brother. He entered the castle after you were wed to Ahrensbach, so I do not believe you two ever met.”

Ferdinand smoothly stepped forward to stand in front of Georgine. Then, when their eyes met, he smiled.

...What the freaking heck?!

Ferdinand was smiling—*legitimately* smiling. His expression was brighter than anything I had ever seen from him before as he knelt before and greeted Georgine.

“May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the vibrant summer rays of Leidenschaft the God of Fire?” Ferdinand asked, eventually standing back up when he was done.

Georgine asked him a few things about me and his experience being my guardian, which he answered with a smile that was now bordering on radiant. I didn’t even know what to say. He looked three times kinder and gentler than he usually did with his surly frown, so much so that it was hard to imagine him and his normal inexpressive self were the same person. The Ferdinand I was seeing here looked almost exactly like how Wilma drew him.

It’s strange... He’s smiling so much, but somehow, it feels like he’s actually loathing this.

Georgine, having finished being greeted by the archducal family, began walking around the hall to converse with the other nobles. It appeared that she had many associates here, having been born in Ehrenfest.

“How do you do, Lady Georgine?” one noblewoman asked.

“My my, if it isn’t Gloria. How truly nostalgic. It is good to see you well.”

“I plan to hold a tea party while you are here, and I would be honored if you were to attend.”

“Why of course. I am quite looking forward to it.”

She was first surrounded by a group of women, but then there were men speaking to her as well. It seemed that it was the nobles older than forty who knew her and were especially pleased to see her again.

“Lady Georgine, you are as beautiful as ever...” one man said.

“Oh my, and you are as much of a smooth talker as ever. Aha.”

Georgine wore the most elegant smile as she moved through the crowd of nobles, staying at its center and effortlessly maintaining conversations in a striking display of social skills that truly befitted the first wife of a greater duchy’s archduke.

Dirk’s Mana and Submission Contract

Once Georgine’s welcoming ceremony was complete, Ferdinand and I promptly returned to the temple. Wilfried was going to be staying inside the northern building for the most part so as to minimize contact with other nobles, and while I could have done the same, it was decided that I would have an easier time staying at the temple and resuming my usual work. Besides, being stuck in the northern building would have meant being unable to even go to the book room.

And, I mean... the temple has a book room, too.

Georgine’s presence meant more traffic going in and out of the Noble’s Quarter, and as we didn’t want to give weight to the various rumors and messages being passed around, I wasn’t allowed to visit Hasse, nor was I allowed to summon the Plantin Company or the Gilberta Company to the temple. But even with these restrictions, I was having a better time than I would have been having in the castle—in fact, the days following Georgine’s arrival were so normal that I barely even thought about the fact she was here in Ehrenfest. I practiced harspiel till third bell, then helped Ferdinand up until fourth bell.

One day, when I returned to the High Bishop’s chambers for lunch after fourth bell, I found Fritz waiting for me with a somewhat serious look on his face—a contrast to his usual calm demeanor. It was rare for him to be in my chambers at noon when he would normally be in the workshop, so whatever he needed to talk about, it was serious.

“Has something happened, Fritz?”

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne. There is something I must tell you about Dirk at once,” he said anxiously.

All of a sudden, the realization hit me—I had basically forgotten about Dirk’s mana for an entire year. We had stealthily sucked it all up using taues last year, but that wasn’t a permanent solution; his mana would simply overflow again, and it would continue doing so until we did something about it.

I needed to speak with Ferdinand about what to do with Dirk going forward. It wasn't something I could discuss too openly due to the submission contract he had been forced to sign with Count Bindewald, and trying to help him on my own would no doubt result in me getting yelled at again.

"Fran, please request a meeting with Ferdinand."

"As you wish."

Fran conveyed in his message that we were in a rush, and surprisingly, Ferdinand scheduled the meeting for fifth bell the next day.

It would normally be three days after he received the message. Why tomorrow? Mm... Could it be that Ferdinand has tons of spare time right now, since he's stuck here in the temple watching over me?

At fifth bell on the day of, I exited the High Bishop's chambers with Fran, Fritz, and Damuel, walking down the hallway just in time to see Eckhart hurry out of the High Priest's chambers and toward the front entrance. It looked like Ferdinand had sent him off on some urgent business.

Now that I think about it, I've barely seen Eckhart in Ferdinand's room lately. Has he been busy with some other work? It must be rough serving such a demanding master.

When we entered, Ferdinand welcomed us with a curt, "Well, what is it? You seem to be in a rush." He didn't even look up from his paperwork.

"Ferdinand, could you please clear the room? I wish to have only Damuel, Fran, and Fritz with us for this discussion."

Ferdinand looked over those I named, then sighed and muttered, "Not anything positive, then..." as he waved his hand.

His attendants all stopped at once, putting away their work and pushing the tea cart over to Fran before quietly leaving the room. Fritz closed the door once they were gone.

"Now then, Rozemyne—what happened?" Ferdinand asked, taking a sip of the tea Fran had poured for him. I glanced over at Fritz, who gave a nod before answering in my place.

"I was told this by Wilma, but it seems that Dirk's mana has been growing rapidly as of late. She wishes for your help."

"Dirk?" Ferdinand asked, his brow furrowed.

I quickly interjected to explain. "Dirk is the Devouring baby Count

Bindewald signed a submission contract with."

"Ah. I suppose his mana is close to overflowing by now," he replied, now understanding why we were here.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "What should we do? Make him offer up his mana? Allowing it to build up too much could kill him, so I want this settled as soon as possible."

"Indeed," Ferdinand concurred. "We do need as much mana as we can get right now." He smoothly stood up, slid his mana-blocking leather gloves on, then took a black feystone out of a cabinet, dropping it into a leather bag which he then handed to me. "As we cannot allow a pre-baptism child to leave the orphanage, he cannot directly offer his mana to the divine instruments. Instead, you will need to drain it using this feystone. It will suck your mana out as well if you touch it, so take care to avoid doing so. Have your attendants handle it. They need only touch it against the baby's skin for his mana to be sucked out."

"Thank you ever so much, Ferdinand. Here you are, Fran," I said, immediately passing the bag to him. It would be much safer in his care than mine. "Also... you could say I'm really here to discuss something else, which is, well... Was Dirk's submission contract ever nullified like we talked about?"

It had already been a year and a half since Count Bindewald was imprisoned, so things had naturally settled down enough for us to discuss this matter.

"Ah..." Ferdinand drew his brow into a frown and drummed his fingers against his temple as he fell into thought, completely losing sight of everyone else. "Up to this point, we have paid it no mind, but I suppose now is the time to do so. We cannot leave things be any longer, considering what is about to happen. Perhaps we could change his master to you, but that would only create another weakness to be exploited..."

"Um, Ferdinand? That's not what I was talking about. I asked whether the contract was nullified," I said, interrupting his murmuring. He looked down at me, his brow still furrowed.

"It was best to leave the contract be."

"Why?"

"We do not need to worry about another noble signing with him when he is already under a contract, so there was no need to nullify it and create

more problems to worry about. No noble would take a baby signed with a criminal from another duchy, and it was easiest to simply leave him in the orphanage where he would be taken care of without issue."

"I see... Then why do we need to reconsider the situation now?"

Ferdinand silently took out a sound-blocking magic tool, and only once he had confirmed that I was grasping the other end did he answer. "Georgine."

I knew she was in Ehrenfest, but what did that have to do with anything? She didn't have any connection to Dirk.

"We did not expect her to become the first wife of Ahrensbach, and it is certainly not good for us that she has," Ferdinand continued. "For now, she is likely to be overwhelmed with the work expected of an archduke's first wife, but once she has more time on her hands, she will no doubt investigate Ehrenfest and discover the incident with Count Bindewald."

"Count Bindewald was from Ahrensbach?" I asked. On reflection, I did seem to remember someone mentioning that he was very influential somewhere in the south of Ehrenfest.

"Indeed, he was. Georgine was the third wife at the time of the incident, and judging by how she was not even informed about Bezewanst's death, we can imagine she was told nothing of what happened. Ahrensbach's archduke would not want it widely known that a noble from his duchy invaded and caused problems within Ehrenfest, as that would give us a political advantage. That said, first wives are heavily involved in politics, and she is now in a position to find out about these things. There is much she will surely learn through investigation."

I nodded as though I understood what Ferdinand was getting at, but in all honesty, I was completely clueless. How would Georgine learning about Dirk and Count Bindewald change anything?

"This should not be so hard for you to understand. It is known to all that you are the High Bishop and the orphanage director. Georgine may use the contract with Count Bindewald to force us to hand over Dirk, or otherwise use it as an excuse to investigate the orphanage."

"Would the first wife of a greater duchy's archduke really do all that for a Devouring orphan?"

"You truly have no talent for gathering information, do you?" Ferdinand said, shooting me a glare. But, well, I *was* being kept away from the other

nobles; it wasn’t fair for him to criticize my information gathering skills, or lack thereof. “The person Georgine hates and resents above all else is Sylvester—the one who stole the position of aub from her. You should know this, given that you read those letters Bezewanst was concealing.”

Sorry... I apologized silently, maintaining a serious expression on the outside. *I understood that she’d felt that way at the time, but I didn’t think her grudge would endure twenty whole years.*

“And now there’s you, a girl whom Sylvester favored enough to willingly adopt. That alone is enough to make you a target, not to mention the fact you are partially responsible for the death of Bezewanst—a family member so near and dear to her heart that she maintained contact with him for years upon years after her marriage. She learned of your involvement just earlier, on this very visit.”

“Wait, what?! How do you know that?!”

How could Ferdinand know what Georgine was doing during her stay here when he was stuck in the temple, making sure I didn’t do anything unsupervised?

He scoffed at my surprise. “Eckhart and Justus are providing me with a steady stream of information. I am in the temple partially to keep an eye on you, but also so that those two will not need to be chained to my whereabouts.”

Eckhart was being told about tea parties that Mother was holding at her estate, while Justus was going all over the place to gather information directly. As it turned out, Sylvester was even summoning Ferdinand in the middle of the night so that he could complain about the struggles he was having to endure.

“The faction containing those most connected to Ahrensbach lost a considerable amount of power when Sylvester’s mother was arrested, so they are currently attempting to regain as much influence as they can through Georgine now that she has the weight of a greater duchy behind her. As we speak, they are actively strengthening their connections with her, and it was at a tea party held with that intention where Viscountess Dahldolf told Georgine many, many things.”

I listened to Ferdinand’s explanation about noble politics, and while I didn’t really understand what he was talking about, I needed to at least ask about that name I didn’t recognize.

“Ferdinand, who is Viscountess Dahldolf?”

“The mother of that foolish knight who forsook his duty as a guard and harmed you, allowing the trombe we fought to grow a new patch.”

Wait... Does he mean Shikza’s mother?! Gaaah! That’s terrifying! I didn’t want to know about this, no matter how important it is for my safety!

I shuddered as I remembered Shikza’s cold eyes as he thrust a knife toward me, talking about gouging out my eyes because I was just a commoner.

“She has not openly contacted you as part of an oath she made to the archduke following her son’s execution. In return, however, she curses you endlessly at tea parties and volunteers all she knows to those present. It is quite the annoyance as she does this only at tea parties attended exclusively by her allies, making it difficult for members of the Leisegang faction to confirm exactly what is being said.”

She had gone so far as to beg Bezewanst and Veronica for Shikza’s punishment to be lessened, so it only made sense that she would be in a faction opposed to Elvira and Florencia’s. It also followed that she would rejoice at Georgine’s visit, hold a tea party, and then use that opportunity to tell her all about how Bezewanst had died because of me.

“...That’s scary.”

“I am glad that even one as hopelessly carefree as yourself can identify the danger you are in here. If Georgine proceeds to take Veronica’s place, supporting that faction as the first wife of a greater duchy’s archduke, then she will possess a significant amount of influence in Ehrenfest. And in the midst of all this, it will be hard for us to resist if she claims that a Devouring child signed to Count Bindewald belongs to Ahrensbach. Remember that Ehrenfest is but a medial duchy.”

It seemed that Dirk could be stolen away by a number of people through many different means: there was the pressure from Ahrensbach; the family of Count Bindewald, who could claim ownership over him; and the nobles in cahoots with Georgine.

“It is possible that the saint myth we have constructed around you may be tarnished merely by her taking the orphan and framing you and your orphanage in a negative light—at least, that is something I could accomplish quite easily in her position. We cannot predict what she will do at the moment, but she has destructive options.”

“In that case, we really should nullify his submission contract with Count Bindewald and establish a new one with me as his master. No other noble could take him away once he’s signed to the archduke’s adopted daughter, right? You did mutter something about doing that earlier.”

This approach would make it a lot harder for anyone to publicly go after Dirk, and it would certainly be much easier to keep him safe when he wasn’t fair game to so many people. I didn’t want to keep him in such a dangerous position.

“We could sign him with you, which would no doubt be the best move in terms of protecting him. But doing so would also turn him into a weakness of yours, exploitable by any who wish to earn your favor or harm you.”

“Dirk is like family to me by this point, so he’s already a weak point. Focus on protecting him,” I said. The light of my blessing had flown to Dirk when I prayed for him to be helped, so the connection between us was more than clear.

Ferdinand closed his eyes tightly. “Just how many people does this fool intend to consider family...?” he cursed under his breath. “Signing the contract to protect him would be simple, but your circumstances have changed considerably since then. Doing this will make you his guardian, and a child with a guardian cannot stay in the orphanage. You will thus have to raise him yourself, and where exactly do you intend to do that?”

When Dirk first signed with Count Bindewald, he was taken out of the orphanage and moved to the High Bishop’s chambers. He was only being raised in the orphanage now because Bezewanst had died and his master was imprisoned, leaving nobody to raise him.

Having Dirk sign with me naturally meant that I would need to take him into my care, but an unbaptized baby couldn’t work in the castle as a servant. And while he would officially be considered family, I couldn’t ask Elvira to raise him when she had nothing to do with him. The most realistic option was for me to look after him in the High Bishop’s chambers, but that would just increase the burden on my attendants.

“Do not tell me you intend to hire attendants exclusively for raising a baby.”

“Ngh... Now that you mention it, I would want to keep him in the orphanage for as long as possible.”

The most important thing to consider was that me taking custody of Dirk would mean ripping him away from Delia, who wasn't allowed to leave the orphanage. She cared for him like a little brother, so I didn't want to tear them apart until I absolutely had to. At the very least, I wanted them to be together until he was baptized and moved to the boys' building.

"Mm... Could we move his contract over to me in a way that won't force him to leave the orphanage?"

"No such convenient method exists. Or... No, wait. Perhaps one does."

"Seriously?! You really can do everything, Ferdinand!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together in joy.

Ferdinand gave an exceedingly displeased grimace. "I cannot say that I enjoy copying Sylvester's methods here, but you could entrust him with a pre-signed contract and then have those in the orphanage stamp his blood on it only when danger befalls him, thereby delaying it for as long as possible. That would allow him to stay there, would it not?"

"Hm... I guess it would."

While I hadn't given it much thought before now, Sylvester's magic tool contract thing had really come through when it counted. That whole ordeal felt like ancient history now, though.

"I shall nullify his contract with the count and prepare a submission contract for you to sign. Have someone you can trust in the orphanage keep it ready for Dirk."

"Thank you ever so much."

I signed the contract that Ferdinand made and folded it up. It was just a piece of parchment, so I could guess he hadn't thought it necessary to make an entire magic tool for Dirk to wear when we were only dealing with a plain old submission contract. I had signed Dirk's name for him, and it would take effect only once his blood was stamped onto that signature.

"Thank you for the help," I repeated once everything was sorted. "I'll keep you updated on his mana and regularly drain it with the feystone."

With our conversation over, I exited Ferdinand's room and immediately started heading to the orphanage. Judging by Fritz's expression when he had come to see me, Dirk was probably in a really bad state.

No sooner had I arrived than Wilma came rushing over. "Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for visiting us today. Dirk's face has recently started to bubble a little whenever he cries, and—"

“Wilma, I just discussed this matter with the High Priest. Everything is going to be fine. Just bring Dirk to me,” I said, stopping her anxious explanation and glancing toward Fran. He stepped forward with the bag containing the black feystone.

“As you wish,” Wilma replied. “Delia? Delia! Please bring Dirk here at once!”

I could hear a voice say “Okay” from farther inside the dining hall, and soon enough, I noticed Delia walking over while holding hands with Dirk. He had grown fairly large since the last time I saw him, now big enough to run along with his diaper swaying behind him. His steps were rather wobbly, though—enough that I was expecting him to fall over at any moment.

Is Kamil about this big now, too...? I wondered. I had spotted him from afar during the spring coming of age ceremony, but Tuuli was hugging him from behind to stop him wandering off, so I hadn’t actually seen him run about or anything.

“...Dirk certainly has grown.”

“Oh yes, his growth amazes me more by the day. He truly is a bundle of surprises,” Wilma said with a giggle before her eyes clouded over with worry again.

“Wilma, there is nothing to fear; I have borrowed a feystone that absorbs mana from Ferdinand. Dirk’s symptoms will vanish once I use it on him.”

As she sighed in relief, Dirk finally reached us and grabbed onto her leg. He looked up at her with big, round eyes as if demanding she praise him.

“Goo, goooo...”

It was like I was seeing Kamil, which immediately warmed my heart. I squatted down a little to look at Dirk, but the moment we made eye contact, he stopped holding onto Wilma and ran away from me, instead clinging to Delia while fearfully shaking his head. It reminded me of the way Kamil used to cry every time I held him.

Why? Why...?

“It is good to see you, Lady Rozemyne. Please take care of Dirk for me,” Delia said, kneeling before me and hugging him as he clung to her.

I nodded and looked at Fran. He took out the feystone and knelt in front of Dirk, who hurriedly hid behind Delia and began to wail.

“Goodness, Dirk. Don’t cry. Your face will get all bubbly and...” Delia

began, but when she saw the black feystone in Fran's hand, her expression changed. She held Dirk protectively, probably remembering the time Bezewanst had forcibly sucked out his mana. Her reaction made her look more like a tiny mom than an older sister.

"It's okay, Delia. This stone won't put him in any danger, so long as you aren't trying to suck out all his mana like the previous High Bishop did. What's important right now is that his mana is overflowing—something that's very dangerous. Would you like to be the one to hold the feystone, seeing as Dirk seems to be afraid of Fran? That way, you'll be able to keep an eye on how he's feeling as his mana drains."

Delia glared at the black feystone being held out to her, then hesitantly took it and pressed it against Dirk's hand with a worried look on her face. He let out a confused noise, looking up at her while blinking curiously. His mana must have started flowing out, and I knew how that felt all too well—it was a surprisingly good sensation, almost like your entire body was getting lighter. Dirk must have been enjoying it, given how he was happily reaching his hands toward his big sister.

"I... think that should be enough," Delia muttered, noticing Dirk turn his head away with an uncomfortable look on his face. She removed the feystone from his skin and returned it to Fran with a bright smile. "I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne. Now we don't have to worry anymore."

I nodded in response, though my expression was stern. "Delia, I just discussed Dirk's submission contract with the High Priest. Would you and Wilma mind discussing it with me?"

Delia's eyes widened in surprise and she quickly straightened her back. Wilma, meanwhile, nodded with a serious expression.

"Dirk's submission contract with Count Bindewald has been nullified," I continued. "From this point onward, he will stay in the orphanage as a normal Devouring child."

"Did you hear that, Dirk? Isn't that nice?"

"*However*, it is possible that an Ehrenfest noble seeking mana or someone associated with Count Bindewald will attempt to take him for themselves."

At this news, both Delia and Wilma stiffened up, with Delia protectively pulling Dirk toward her just as my family had once done with me. My heart

aching with love and bittersweet nostalgia, I held out Dirk's new submission contract for them to see.

"This is a submission contract between Dirk and me. Once it is signed, he will no longer be able to remain in the orphanage. It will, however, prove essential in protecting him. I entrust this to you, Delia."

"What do you mean, you entrust it to her...?" Wilma asked, blinking in surprise. She didn't understand why we weren't just signing it outright.

"I consider Delia to be Dirk's older sister. So, Delia, should the time ever come when he must be protected even at the cost of leaving the orphanage, you may at your discretion stamp his blood against this signature. Doing so will complete the contract, and if such a time comes, I promise to protect him in your stead as his master."

Delia looked at me closely, clearly surprised. Her eyes wandered from the contract, to Dirk, and then back to me. Then, following a pause, she slowly nodded, a sentimental smile on her lips.

"...I know that you keep your promises, Lady Rozemyne. I won't doubt you or allow myself to be manipulated by someone again," she said, looking at me head-on. Her light-blue eyes were filled with a sense of trust that hadn't been there a year and a half ago, and the thought that she wouldn't be chained to the orphanage right now had I managed to earn this faith back when she was my attendant made my heart twinge with regret. But at the same time, I knew that I would be able to build a new, stronger relationship with her going forward.

Georgine Departs

One day, while helping Ferdinand in his chambers, an ordonnanz arrived from Sylvester. Ferdinand listened to it, then turned to me and said that Georgine was being seen off tomorrow.

“Finally...” I muttered without thinking.

Whatever faction it was that opposed Elvira and our allies had been working doggedly in the shadows, and while I didn’t want to be rude to our guest, I seriously just wanted them gone as soon as possible. It felt as though I had been deprived of seeing the Gilberta Company and the Plantin Company for a surprisingly long time, not to mention it had been forever since I last visited Hasse.

“Everyone, we are heading to the castle right after breakfast tomorrow to see off our guest,” I announced to my attendants and guard knights upon returning to my chambers.

While we were discussing our plans, an ordonnanz for Brigitte flew in. Given the time, it was probably from Illgner, and as expected, the bird spoke a message thrice in Giebe Illgner’s voice.

“It seems the new type of paper is ready, but they do not know how to test the ink on it,” Brigitte said. “They will therefore be sending completed samples to the castle for you, so that those in the workshop may test it for themselves and decide whether to proceed with mass production.”

Clasping my hands together, I responded with an impressed whistle. I had expected it to take them a lot longer than a single month to discover the right balance of ingredients, so Lutz and Gil must have been working hard.

“Lady Rozemyne, how shall I reply?” Brigitte asked, creating an ordonnanz to send in response.

I faced the bird and spoke. “You have already finished the new paper? I would expect nothing less from my Gutenbergs. I have business in the castle tomorrow, so I shall collect the paper at once.”

We arrived at the castle much sooner than third bell. Rihyarda was there

waiting for me, immediately whisking me away to change my clothes, redo my hair, and put a veil on me. I was then escorted to a waiting room, where I would be stuck until it was time to see off Georgine.

When I stepped inside, I found Ferdinand in a change of clothes with work spread out before him, despite having returned to his estate in the Noble's Quarter.

"You're working now of all times, Ferdinand?"

"There is still time before Georgine is due to leave. Why would I not use it productively? Anything less would be inefficient," he said while directing Eckhart around.

"Should I work as well, then? I have a package from Illgner to fetch, but I'm not sure where to go for it. Could you tell me? One of my most important jobs is checking the quality of their new paper, after all."

"I received no such report from Illgner," Ferdinand said with a glare.

I gave a big nod. "I knew that you would want to hear about this, so rather than asking Rihyarda to pass the message on, I thought I would simply tell you myself. This is new paper made with new ingredients, you know. Don't you want to see it before anyone else? I know I do. Not to mention, I helped you just recently by transporting all of your luggage in Lessy, so you should return the favor and help me with my work," I said, putting my all into securing his assistance no matter what.

Ferdinand grimaced, then stood up as he gave his response. "Very well, but only if you continue to carry my luggage moving forward as well."

That wasn't an issue at all, especially considering that he probably would have tossed his luggage into Lessy either way. My Pandabus was just too useful and he knew it.

"I thank you ever so much, Ferdinand."

It seemed that the main building of the castle had a storeroom for boards, paperwork, and the like sent from provincial nobles, separate from the one used for storing collected taxes. Scholar-officials managed the mail as well, stacking up everything received through the teleportation circles and then separating them based on their contents. It instantly made me think of the post offices back on Earth.

"Lord Ferdinand, we did not expect you to come here directly. Is something the matter?" one surprised scholar asked, walking over as we arrived. It seemed that Ferdinand normally sent his own scholars to collect

his mail, and that this was not at all somewhere members of the archducal family usually visited themselves.

“Has there been any mail from Illgner addressed to Rozemyne?”

“Yes, we just recently received a parcel for her. Here you are.”

Ferdinand smoothly took the box and checked the address card attached to it with string before opening it. Inside was the newly made paper, a letter, and a small metal card that he promptly took out.

“Rozemyne, write your name on this card. It will serve as a record that you received this parcel.”

I signed my name on the metal card using a mana pen that Ferdinand let me borrow. He glanced over it before putting it back in the box, which he then returned to the scholar.

“Now, we are done here.”

“Right. Thanks for your help.”

And so, I climbed into my one-person Pandabus with the letter and new paper held securely against my chest. I had only touched the paper a little, but it was firm and felt silky smooth. If we were able to print ink on it well enough, it would be perfect for playing cards.

I need to contact Heidi through Benno... She’ll definitely love having new paper to work with.

I hummed cheerfully on our way back to the waiting room, getting straight to reading the letter once we were inside. It was from Lutz and Gil, saying pretty much the same thing as the ordonnanz—they wanted me to deliver the paper to Heidi so that she could research which ink would pair with it best. They also mentioned that the gray priests were actively making paper and having an all-around good time.

As there was still some time to spare, I decided to tear one of the new sheets of paper into tiny squares that we could use when testing the ink. This could usually be done by folding the paper and then ripping along the newly formed creases, but would paper this firm fold cleanly enough for that? If not, I would need to go through the effort of drawing out straight lines and then using a precision knife to cut along them.

I started off with a single mountain fold, and despite how firm the paper was, it bent just fine without breaking or cracking. Then, I repeated a sequence of valley and mountain folds to make a wave-like shape.

“Oh, now it looks like a (harisen).”

Harisens were large paper fans typically used to hit people over the head in Japanese comedy routines. The paper was just firm enough to maintain the fan shape, and when I experimentally slapped it against my palm, it made a pretty satisfying *thwack* sound.

“Rozemyne, what is that? What is its purpose?” Ferdinand asked, having been distracted from his work as he watched me swing around the harisen with a confused look on his face.

“Eheheh. You use it like this. Hyah!”

Springing into action, I swung the harisen straight down at Ferdinand’s head. But despite my attempted surprise attack, he deftly raised his left forearm to block the fan before using his other hand to snatch it away. Then, he promptly struck me over the head with it.

“Eep!”

“Ah, I see. So that is what this is used for,” Ferdinand said, slapping the harisen against his hand with a satisfied grin. He looked so pleased with himself that it actually irritated me.

“Ngh... Give it back.”

“You can have it back when we return to the temple. Now stop playing around and help me with my work,” he replied.

And so, I was stuck doing math until it was time to see off Georgine. I tied up my sleeves with some cord that I asked Rihyarda to fetch for me so that my long sleeves wouldn’t get dirty, and after working for a while, Wilfried joined us in the waiting room.

“Rozemyne, what are you doing over there?” he asked.

“I’m helping Ferdinand with his work, just like I do at the temple. Would you care to join us?”

“No, I need to practice my farewells to Auntie. I’ll have to help you some other time.”

As we continued our work, Oswald taught Wilfried a lengthy noble farewell that went like so: *“I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves the threads of our fates together once again.”* Put simply, it meant “I hope to see you again,” and it was used to politely say goodbye when you had no immediate intention of making an agreement to meet again soon.

Eventually, Norbert came to inform us that Georgine was departing. We all headed to the front entrance of the castle, Ferdinand getting Eckhart to

carry me there since he didn’t want to risk her seeing my highbeast and kicking up a fuss.

By the time we arrived at the gate, Ferdinand’s expression had morphed from a stony poker face to a polite, handsome smile—one that remained for the entire duration he spoke to Georgine.

“I pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods until Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves the threads of our fates together once again,” I said, speaking the same farewell without so much as wavering.

Once everyone had finished, Wilfried must have had a sudden thought, as he broke formation and ran up to Georgine. “We didn’t get to talk much this time, Auntie. I hope we can spend more time together soon!”

Everyone had carefully cultivated an atmosphere that made it clear Georgine wouldn’t be coming back for a long time, but with a single sentence, Wilfried had torn that to shreds. Florencia looked down at him, her indigo eyes opened wide with surprise, while his attendants were covering their mouths with their hands.

I could feel an especially icy aura radiating from Ferdinand. That same handsome smile was still on his face, but just standing next to him had me quaking in fear.

Despite the shocked reactions of everyone around her, Georgine appeared to be feigning ignorance. “I see. I had no idea that you wished to speak with me more,” she said with a small, happy smile, bending down to meet Wilfried’s gaze. “In that case... perhaps I should return next year, at around this same time?”

“Yes, please! I can’t wait!”

While Wilfried rejoiced, gleeful innocence in his dark-green eyes, Georgine elegantly turned her head to look at Florencia. “It would not be a bother for me to accept this invitation, would it?”

The proper response would probably have been, *“Did you not hear what literally everyone else just said to you?”* But nobody seeing her off was even close to being a high enough status to get away with saying something like that.

Florencia, having failed to predict her son’s spur-of-the-moment action, had only one answer to give: “Not at all. We would love to see you again soon.”

And so, it was decided that Georgine would return to Ehrenfest next year.

Ferdinand's smile vanished the instant Georgine's carriage was out of sight, giving way to a deep scowl. His golden eyes shone with cold anger as he glared down at Wilfried, the only one present who looked at all pleased. "Do it, Rozemyne," he said, holding out the harisen he had previously confiscated from me.

Why did he bring that here...? I wondered. But as much as I wanted to know, the idea of actually asking right now terrified me, so I simply nodded and took the fan from him. Wilfried had shocked his parents, put his attendants through agony, and angered Ferdinand... Far be it from me to not exploit this opportunity.

I raised the harisen high into the air, then brought it down on Wilfried's head with a sharp *crack*. "You big idiot! You shouldn't have said that! Learn to read the mood!"

His eyes widened in shock. "Why did you do that?!"

"That's what I should be asking you! How big of an idiot do you have to be to give Georgine an excuse to come again next year?!" I shouted, spotting Sylvester and Florencia nodding in agreement out of the corner of my eye.

"Wha...? All I said was that I wanted to speak with her more!"

"And that's the problem! What farewell were you taught today? When is that particular farewell used? And why do you think your parents, the archducal couple, chose that farewell of all farewells?"

Wilfried blinked in confusion, but Oswald had already explained all this to him in the waiting room.

"Rozemyne, we can continue this discussion inside," Ferdinand chided. "And do not get so excited. You will collapse."

With that, he began walking off. I followed after him, swallowing the urge to ask, *"And who was it that gave me the harisen in the first place?"*

Sylvester promptly took the lead, bringing us to a small meeting room that was closest to the main building's front entrance. We took our seats, and for some time, nobody offered anything except the occasional sigh, all fixing Wilfried with cold, quiet eyes.

Eventually, Wilfried couldn't take it anymore. With his brow furrowed,

he hesitantly broke the silence. “I’ve thought about it, but I still don’t understand. I wanted to speak to Auntie more, but I guess Mother and Father don’t?”

At this, literally everyone sighed—including the mother and father in question, of course.

“Correct,” Sylvester replied. “We don’t want archdukes from other duchies and their first wives in the castle, even if we are siblings. It’s precisely because we’re related that it’s hard for us to figure out what information they’re getting, where they’re getting it, and how they plan to use it.”

“We taught you that particular farewell for a reason,” Florencia added. “You must not act on your own before higher-status individuals, as doing so creates openings that can be exploited in ways we don’t always understand. It seems we will not be able to send you to the Royal Academy until you have learned a bit more about the world.”

The Royal Academy was attended by nobles from both larger duchies and higher-ranked duchies than Ehrenfest, not to mention royal children from the king’s family who directly ruled the Sovereignty. Those were people Wilfried would need to bow and be endlessly polite to, but up until now, he had only ever needed to bow his head to his parents.

But even with his mother openly expressing her worry about his future, Wilfried still didn’t seem to comprehend the idea of someone being higher in status than him.

Sylvester crossed his arms. “Someone of a higher status than Wilfried, huh...? Bonifatius is the only guy who comes to mind...”

But Wilfried had already been respectful to Bonifatius, who had cared for him during the last Archduke Conference. That defeated the point.

“Wilfried, you aren’t very polite to Ferdinand even though he’s an older member of the archducal family,” I interjected. “I’ve always thought that was a bit rude. Maybe you should call him ‘Uncle’ and be more courteous to him, just like you called Georgine ‘Auntie’ and were courteous to her. You can learn to kneel by paying your respects to him.”

At this suggestion, Wilfried looked at me, wide-eyed. “Rozemyne, Ferdinand isn’t my superior. Grandmother told me all about him being beneath me!”

“Ferdinand has since returned to noble society, and he is of a higher

status than you within the archducal family. What about that does not make sense to you?”

“But... Grandmother said—”

“Wilfried. Over a year has passed since your grandmother was imprisoned as a criminal. Why are you still paying any mind to the things she told you?”

His expression was suddenly overcome with shock, at which point Oswald hurriedly stepped between us. “Lady Rozemyne, we were planning to disclose that information to Lord Wilfried when he is a little older...”

“Oswald, did the events of autumn last year not teach you what happens when Wilfried is kept from reality?”

It took me a second to fully comprehend what Oswald had meant. And when I looked around, I noticed that Sylvester was shutting his eyes tightly, as if wincing at me having revealed the truth.

I gazed at him and Florencia. Ferdinand had long been drilling complex noble social rules into my head, and I wasn’t even their successor. Why were they letting Wilfried stagnate like this? The thought made my heart and mind grow icy cold.

“We were previously able to beat everything Wilfried needed to know into him right before his winter debut, but procrastinating until the very last moment should not be the norm. My adoptive mother and father would not be so foolish as to repeat the same mistake by not teaching him until right before he is due to enter the Royal Academy, would they?”

I hoped that everyone would forgive my sharp tone, but it was because Wilfried’s grandmother had forged documents to get Count Bindewald into the city that I had ended up separated from my family. She was also the one responsible for Ferdinand being forced into the temple, having abused him so much that he truly believed his life was in danger. To be honest, even though I hadn’t ever met the woman, I hated her with a passion.

“Wilfried, I won’t tell you to stop acknowledging your grandmother, but I don’t approve of you disrespecting my guardian just because she didn’t like him. Ferdinand is a member of the archducal family. If anyone here does not know their place, it is you.”

Sylvester made a deliberate show of nodding in agreement. “Rozemyne’s right here. Ferdinand was clearly of a lower status before when he was a priest, but now he’s back in noble society, and he’s my half-

brother. Wilfried, you shall henceforth respect him as your uncle."

"Father, you can't be serious!" Wilfried protested. But Sylvester simply ignored him and looked at Oswald.

"Oswald, you will need to teach Wilfried how to be respectful from the ground up. Rozemyne, got any ideas for the best way to raise him here?"

"I think it would be best for you, Florencia, and his attendants to think about that yourselves. As I have mentioned before, I am busy with many other things, and thus do not have the time to dedicate to educating Wilfried once again. A great deal of work has piled up while Lady Georgine's visit was restricting my movement."

The last time this was a problem, I had offered my assistance out of sympathy for Wilfried, thinking it unfair that he was being disinherited when it was his environment that was at fault and wanting Florencia to regain control over his education. But his debut was now over and his parents were overseeing his schooling again, so I didn't see why I should have to dedicate any more of my already precious time to him.

I need to contact the Plantin Company, get the new paper to Heidi, call the Gilberta Company over to get Tuuli's latest hair stick... I mused, listing off everything I hadn't been able to do because of Georgine.

"Ferdinand, would it be problematic at all for me to visit Hasse now?" I asked, subtly suggesting that we abandon this meeting and return to the temple. He understood my intention at once, immediately standing up from his chair.

"Not in the least."

"So, why do you wish to go to Hasse?" Ferdinand asked once we were back at the temple and en route to his chambers.

"I recently received a letter from Hasse asking for a meeting with me, mentioning that they were hoping I could purchase some orphans to fund their winter preparations. As they did not receive a blessing during Spring Prayer, their harvest was notably poor compared to last year, so they are hoping to build up as much funding as they can as far in advance as possible."

Ferdinand nodded. "I will need to accompany you, then. Set the meeting for the afternoon the day after tomorrow."

"Will do. Oh, and can I send some gray priests to Hasse this winter?"

“To what end, exactly?”

“Well, the truth is... the letter they sent me was very crudely written. I think they would have only themselves to blame if they sent something similar to another noble and ended up getting scolded for their rudeness.”

I wasn’t even referring to their handwriting being bad. This time, they had actually used noble euphemisms, writing very fancily and even using the phrase, *“We shall prepare offerings of sweet fruits and beautiful flowers to you, O servant of the gods, and ask only that you hear our needs in return.”* But that actually meant, “We’ll give you women, beer, and money if you just please do what we want,” which really wasn’t appropriate to say to a little girl such as myself.

“It seems very likely that they’re using set phrases adopted over Bezewanst’s long tenure as High Bishop, and I doubt anyone in Hasse knows exactly what they’re saying. Would it not be wise to tell them? I don’t believe there are any commoners who know what that really means.”

“...I see. Such a brazen attempt at bribery would certainly shock any new associates of theirs,” Ferdinand said, tapping a finger against his temple. This was a headache-inducing situation for him, too.

“Exactly. And that’s why I want to send two or three gray priests to Hasse’s winter mansion this year. Could we not just claim it’s to keep an eye on them? Like we’re making sure there aren’t any lingering signs of treason, or something like that?”

“Such an excuse would indeed hold weight during winter this year.”

“In that case, I would like to use this opportunity to have the gray priests teach the new mayor Richt and anyone else who might be writing letters how to properly do paperwork, and what noble euphemisms actually mean.”

“Truthfully, that is not a bad idea. I would not like to receive any such letters myself,” Ferdinand said, granting his permission with an exasperated look. With that, I triumphantly clenched my fists.

Whew. I need to write my response to Hasse right away.

When I returned to the High Bishop’s chambers, I wrote a letter to Richt detailing the date of our meeting and one to Hasse’s monastery telling them to prepare rooms for the incoming orphans.

“Monika, please contact Wilma. I require enough living necessities for five people to be taken from the orphanage’s spares in preparation for the

afternoon the day after tomorrow. I imagine Hasse has enough that they could provide these themselves, but it is better to have extra than not enough."

"As you wish. I will go to the orphanage at once."

"Fran, I need someone to contact the Plantin Company in Gil's absence. Do you think Fritz is suitable for the job?"

He paused for a moment in thought, then nodded. "I believe he is capable."

"Could we ask the Plantin Company to visit tomorrow afternoon, then? I would like to give them the new paper I just received from Illgner."

Now that Georgine was gone, I no longer had any restrictions holding me back. I gave order after order, making my way through all the business that had piled up while I was restricted to the temple. And perhaps because I had barely met the woman during her stay, I was already forgetting about her. In no time at all, her presence had entirely faded from my mind.

Epilogue

The sun was setting sooner every day.

Autumn was the busiest season for giebes, as it was the season when tax officials came and the Harvest Festival was performed, so all those who had gathered in the Noble's Quarter to welcome Georgine from Ahrensbach now needed to hurry back to their respective provinces.

Viscount Dahldolf was one such noble. Had his province been nearby, it would have been best for him to return by carriage alongside his luggage. But he was in a hurry, and traveling by highbeast was a much faster option.

"Gloria. My apologies, but there is much work at home that only I, as the giebe, can do. Could you ride home to Dahldolf with the carriages while I return first by highbeast?"

"Of course. Have a safe trip, dear," Viscountess Gloria replied with a smile. She would have preferred to hurry home on a highbeast too, but she understood the importance of getting their luggage back safe and sound.

"Thank you. I simply don't want to leave Jeremias home alone for too long. I'm counting on you."

Jeremias. Gloria lowered her eyes a little upon hearing the name. He was the son of her husband's previous first wife, and while she had plotted to have him disinherited and her own son take his place as successor, this had ultimately ended with Shikza's execution. She masked the pain and despair searing her heart with a small smile.

"Certainly. You may count on me."

After watching her husband and his numerous attendants fly off, Gloria left the packing of their luggage to the attendants and servants who managed their winter mansion.

Gloria climbed into a carriage loaded with luggage and began her trip home to Dahldolf. There wasn't much to do as it bounced and rattled along the path, and so she gazed aimlessly out the window and let thoughts of the past run through her mind. The world was unkind to her, and she hated it

more than she could ever say.

All I want to do is avenge Shikza's death, but I am not even allowed that one comfort...

Soon after Gloria had married Viscount Dahldolf as his second wife and given birth to their son Shikza, they found that the child lacked the mana necessary to be called a mednoble. Her husband thus presented her with three choices: make him a servant of the estate, offer him up to laynobles for adoption, or send him to the temple.

In the end, she decided to send him to the temple, convinced that doing so would give her an opportunity to converse with Bezewanst—the High Bishop at the time—and, through him, form a connection with the archduke's mother, Veronica. It was especially important to cultivate a good relationship with Bezewanst so that they could ask him to prioritize Dahldolf when it came to distributing mana.

And so, Gloria made contact with Veronica, doing everything she could for Shikza through Bezewanst. She was desperate to keep her son as someone important to Dahldolf.

I struggled considerably at the time, but it was all worthwhile...

Her efforts ultimately paid off. She strengthened her bond with Veronica and brought prosperity to Dahldolf, while the death of Jeremias's mother led to her becoming the first wife. The civil war in the Sovereignty also happened at about the same time, and the extraordinary repercussions permitted Shikza to enter the Royal Academy. It was a blessing unthinkable in normal times—her child went from being a blue priest to a noble recognized as the son of Viscount Dahldolf's first wife.

All that remained was to disinherit Jeremias and make Shikza our successor. That was the only thing left to do, and yet...!

Mere days after successfully convincing Veronica to support this transfer of power, Shikza was executed because of an apprentice blue shrine maiden of commoner birth. Gloria's future vanished in an instant as though it had been swallowed by the Goddess of Chaos, leaving her in complete darkness.

Why wasn't the commoner executed instead? Why was my noble son forced to guard that filthy, lesser being?

She pleaded to everyone she could, asking for their support, but Shikza's

charges were already set in stone. Both his and his family's honor were protected due to the death being framed as having occurred on duty, on the condition that they never bother the shrine maiden again. But Gloria wasn't satisfied in the least. Seething hatred for all those involved festered in her heart, growing stronger by the day. She hated the commoner shrine maiden for what she had done to her son, Ferdinand for having ordered him to protect such a filthy commoner in the first place, and Sylvester for decreeing that he be executed.

And yet, any opportunity for revenge vanished when her husband ordered that she never approach the commoner shrine maiden. When winter socializing came around, she searched for anyone else invested in harming the girl who had so gravely wronged her, but nobody was willing to actively work against someone who had been placed under the High Priest's protection...

Nobody except Veronica, that is, because she too hated Ferdinand. Her support would ultimately be given as a way of antagonizing him, though Gloria didn't mind so long as it meant the shrine maiden would suffer as well. But she was denied even that small satisfaction.

A crucial blunder resulted in Veronica getting arrested after inviting Count Bindewald into Ehrenfest, while the commoner child who was supposed to have been kidnapped was instead baptized as the knight commander's daughter for some unfathomable reason. She was even adopted by the archduke right after.

But why?! Why was a commoner apprentice shrine maiden baptized as the knight commander's daughter?! Why was she adopted by the aub himself and given the honor of joining the archducal family, putting her above even me in status?!

To Gloria, there was nothing more intolerable than that—it was an atrocity that dishonored every noble in Ehrenfest. She was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that both the aub and the knight commander had plotted to execute her son for some heinous reason.

Perhaps even the aub is being manipulated by Ferdinand... Veronica often spoke about how dangerous that man is, after all.

Veronica had been the only one to consider Ferdinand dangerous after he entered the temple. And now, Gloria knew that she had been right all along.

Had Lady Georgine become Aub Ehrenfest instead of Lord Sylvester, she

never would have done something as foolish as adopting a commoner into the archducal family...

Gloria still resented beyond words that the previous archduke had chosen Sylvester to be his heir.

Lady Georgine was much better suited to the title.

Not only was she beautiful, but she was a master at orchestrating clever schemes. If she had become the aub, the Leisegangs would have been eliminated in no time at all, and her return to Ehrenfest must have reminded countless other nobles of that truth.

Many in Ehrenfest still believed it with all their hearts—even now, a decade after her departure. Sylvester had severed his primary support base by imprisoning his mother Veronica, and as far as Gloria knew, that meant Georgine now had more supporters among the nobility than he did.

As Gloria stewed in her hate, a white bird phased through the wall of the carriage, transforming into a letter before dropping onto her lap. It was a form of ordonnanz often used when the correspondence was best kept private, so she picked it up and began to read.

The message was from Royella, the wife of Viscount Gerlach, revealing that she had received a letter from Georgine so important that it would shape the very future of Ehrenfest. She wished to discuss it with Gloria, and was thus inviting her to Gerlach.

In an instant, the waves of ardent frustration crashing against Gloria’s heart calmed. When she had bemoaned her suffering to Georgine at a tea party during her visit, the woman had merely responded with a sad smile, saying that although she was the first wife of Ahrensbach and wanted to help, she could not risk interfering in Ehrenfest politics so directly.

What in the world had changed her mind? Perhaps that reply was only lip service in case a spy from the aub was listening... Considering how cautious she was, that would make perfect sense.

Georgine was the one woman Gloria considered worthy of dedicating her heart and soul to. She was her one true mistress, and if she had important plans concerning Ehrenfest, then she would put all else aside and speed to Gerlach as soon as possible. But once she was back at Dahldolf, she couldn’t simply leave again. Now was her best opportunity, while she was still traveling alone by carriage.

“Oh my, I do believe I’ve fallen rather ill... Perhaps the shaking of the carriage has proven too much for me to handle right now. You, make the necessary arrangements for me to stay a few nights at a nearby inn,” Gloria instructed one of her attendants, planning to sneak off to Gerlach on highbeast.

Upon arriving at Gerlach’s summer mansion, Gloria was taken to a guest parlor where she found about ten nobles engaging in relaxed conversation. They were all allies who likewise considered Georgine their mistress, and so she promptly spoke the greeting for reunions to them.

“Hello, Lord Grausam. Lady Royella. Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has answered my prayers and woven the threads of our fates together once again. Never did I think it would happen so soon.”

“Indeed, Lady Gloria. Not even in my wildest dreams did I expect to receive a letter from Lady Georgine so soon,” Royella said with a happy, elegant smile as she offered her a seat.

It seemed that Georgine had sent the message before crossing the duchy’s southern border gate and having her communications blocked.

“If only she had come directly to Gerlach so that we could discuss matters further,” she continued with a sigh. “Here we can speak freely without having to worry about spies from the archduke, unlike in the Noble’s Quarter.”

Grausam patted his wife on the back and laughed. “I can hardly blame her for being so secretive—this is grave enough that she can’t even let those in Ahrensbach know about it. Lady Georgine has always been a careful one.”

They were both in such a lighthearted mood that whatever the news was, it must have been good. Gloria thus asked about the letter, deep down envying Royella for having a husband who understood her so well.

“Lady Royella, might I ask you to share the joy with us? I’d rather you not keep Lady Georgine’s news between you and your husband.”

“Wait just a moment. I shall read it now,” Royella replied, causing everyone present to fall silent and listen intently. If one were to remove all the colorful, decorative language, the message could be described quite simply as thus: *“It seems that I’ve happened upon the path to Ehrenfest’s foundation. Whatever shall I do?”*

“Is that even a question...? Lady Georgine must use this opportunity to obtain Ehrenfest’s foundation for herself!” Gloria declared, all those around her nodding firmly in agreement.

Observing this, Royella smiled and hugged the letter to her chest. “Indeed. Everyone here feels the same way as us, Lady Gloria. But nearly twenty years have passed since Lady Georgine was wed to Ahrensbach; she has spent too much time away. No matter how fervent our wishes, the other nobles simply lack our passion, and Lady Georgine would never be allowed to return to Ehrenfest under normal circumstances.”

Grausam nodded and stood up, his fists tightly clenched. “But now, things are different,” he said, looking over his guests with blazing, hopeful eyes. “Lord Sylvester’s support base was expected to be ironclad once the previous aub climbed the towering staircase, but that could not be further from the truth. The political situation in Ehrenfest is volatile and unstable. Why? Because Lady Veronica was imprisoned last spring. He no longer has the firm pillar of support that he once did, and in these unpredictable times, Lady Georgine has discovered the path to Ehrenfest’s foundation. This must be the divine guidance of the gods!”

His heated speech stirred Gloria’s heart. Veronica adored Sylvester, and if she had remained in a position of power, it was true that Georgine would have had no opportunity to return. But now that she was imprisoned, Sylvester’s support base was wavering. They now had a chance—a window of opportunity in which Georgine had discovered the very path to the foundation. Such splendidly good fortune could not be a mere sequence of coincidences. The gods wished for Lady Georgine to become Aub Ehrenfest, and all those present had that belief carved deeply into their minds.

“Lady Georgine is cautious; she will not make a move unless her success is guaranteed,” Royella continued. “It is for this reason that we must show her ourselves that her return is feasible. Now is our greatest opportunity to shake Ehrenfest to its core. Luckily for us, it was written in her letter that she will be returning the summer of next year thanks to an invitation from Lord Wilfried.”

Everyone immediately leaned forward, discussing what they might do to destabilize Ehrenfest and encourage Georgine’s return.

“How stable is Lord Sylvester’s rule? What openings are there to

exploit?” Grausam mused aloud. “Experimentation will certainly be necessary at first, but if we can show the other nobles how brittle Lord Sylvester’s central support base is, it will put us in a much stronger position to convince the neutral nobles. Lady Georgine will certainly enjoy that.”

“Let us begin by testing the quality of the archducal family, the skills of their retainers, and Lord Sylvester’s ability to control the aftermath of a disaster. We can report our findings to Lady Georgine, and perhaps that will influence her decision come next summer.”

At the moment, nobody knew whether Georgine would move to seize control of the foundation, or whether she would determine it safer to hold back. But either way, it would not be simple for her to return to Ehrenfest as its new aub—not only did she need to be freed from her position as Ahrensbach’s first wife, but she also needed more supporters.

“Obtaining the support of the Veronica faction will be the simplest method to grow her support base. Perhaps we could exploit Lord Wilfried to that end? We trick him into dishonoring himself, then save him and earn his favor, which should make him more susceptible to manipulation in the future,” Royella continued. “Marrying him to Lady Georgine’s granddaughter would be a simple way to keep other nobles in check, too, and if we ever run out of use for him, he can very easily be eliminated.”

It was well known that Veronica had doted on Wilfried, and so getting him on their side would possibly lead other nobles to follow suit and join him.

“Lord Wilfried is certainly worth exploiting, but what about that commoner child, Rozemyne...?” Gloria asked, much more invested in eliminating her. “I doubt Lady Georgine considers her important to her plans.”

She couldn’t help but feel that, if they would just kidnap Rozemyne, she could torture the girl to her heart’s content and finally bring peace to the wrath that tormented her so.

Sensing Gloria’s wrathful emotions, Grausam waved a hand to calm her down. “In order to prevent the resistance of the Leisegangs and make it known to all how foolish it was for them to make Rozemyne the hope of their house, it is necessary that we publicize her commoner origins and restore Bezewanst’s honor. Then, once that is done, we may treat her like any commoner who has deceived nobles deserves to be treated.”

“And by that you mean...?”

Grausam narrowed his gray eyes and slowly stroked his chin before speaking in a monotonous, fairly disinterested tone. “We can chain her up and continually drain her of the bountiful mana that secured her position as the archduke’s adopted daughter, seal her away in the temple as a breeding sow for producing children with high quantities of mana, train her as a Devouring soldier... The possibilities are endless, and each one would certainly be deserved. Plus, if she ever breaks, we need only turn her into a feystone.”

With that, Royella clapped her hands together in sudden realization. “Ah! Lady Georgine said that Ahrensbach was struggling a little with mana due to matters related to the civil war. Perhaps we could hand her over to them? That would at least partially compensate for Lady Georgine’s return.”

If everything went well, an excellent member of the archducal family would be returning to Ehrenfest. Ahrensbach would surely need some mana support to fill the gap she left behind.

Grausam nodded. “We will need to ask Lady Georgine her thoughts first, but that is not a bad idea at all. There are some obstacles to overcome, however. That child holes herself up in the temple and rarely leaves, and Lord Ferdinand—a man so extraordinarily competent that Veronica has spent the past decade fearing him above all others—is personally protecting her. Not even other members of the Leisegang faction can easily approach her despite supposedly being part of her family.”

“We cannot even be certain how much truth there is to the rumor about her ill health; it could be that they are merely claiming she is weak to minimize her contact with the nobility,” one noble said. “We simply lack too much information here.”

His arms crossed, Grausam drummed a finger against his triceps as he always did when deep in thought. An unusual sense of determination was clear in his eyes, likely due to this being a rare opportunity to work for Georgine’s benefit.

“If what we have heard from Lord Sylvester’s retainers is correct, then Lord Ferdinand is as exceedingly dangerous as one would expect from an individual who maintained first place in the Royal Academy throughout his entire time there,” he eventually said. “I, myself, have rarely spoken to him,

so I am uncertain how true these rumors are, but it is very likely he will interfere with our plots and put a stop to any that come to his attention."

Welcoming Georgine back to Ehrenfest would mean dethroning Sylvester. And as Ferdinand fully supported the current archduke, there would be no avoiding his opposition.

"Perhaps we should make our move when they are both forced to leave the temple for some religious ceremony or another? That should limit what Lord Ferdinand can do against us."

Royella cocked her head thoughtfully. "The Harvest Festival is coming up soon. I imagine that, with how few blue priests there are at the moment, both Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne will need to leave the temple to personally oversee it themselves."

"Hold on, but then we'll be stuck in Gerlach," Grausam replied with a slight grimace. He wanted to help Georgine so much that anything holding him back cut deep, and those present couldn't help but smile a little at how dedicated he was.

"Lord Grausam," another noble interjected, "I am not a giebe, and thus I will be able to move freely during the Harvest Festival. Our goal here is to observe how the aub and his supporters respond to what we do, so we can keep things small, correct? With that in mind, I believe it would be best if only those of us who live in the Noble's Quarter act. That will minimize how much can be traced back to Lady Georgine."

Doing anything that would put Sylvester and his supporters on guard too much would not be ideal while Georgine's intentions were still up in the air. They needed to make whatever they did look like as much of an accident as possible, all while leaving an extremely minimal connection to her.

Grausam gave another nod. "Indeed. Our goal is to harm the aub, destabilize his faction, and show that there is an opening to exploit, such that Lady Georgine steels her resolve to return. It is not necessary for us to implement any life-or-death traps here; we should prioritize setting multiple cunning ones that, when strung together, are quite unbreakable," he said, an amused grin spreading across his lips. He was no doubt running several potential plots through his head at that very moment, and Royella could hardly remember the last time she had seen her husband so lively.

"Is Lord Wilfried our target this time?" she asked, gracefully tilting her head once more. "I imagine destabilizing Lord Sylvester's faction through

his biological son will have a much greater impact than using his adopted daughter.”

“Lord Sylvester has always been weak to those precious to him being put in danger,” Grausam said with a laugh. “Attack him directly and he remains steadfast, but target his family and he is much more likely to bend.”

More opinions were shared, and plans were slowly woven together. Gloria of course wanted to participate in the plot against Sylvester, since he had ordered Shikza’s execution, but as the first wife of a giebe, it would be hard for her to leave Dahldolf.

I suppose I will need to continue waiting before I can hurt the commoner, then. That’s a shame... But now I’m one step closer than before, when I could do nothing at all. And once Sylvester is dethroned, there will be nobody to protect that commoner shrine maiden. Aah... How I pray that my dreams will soon come true.

Tea Party

“Charlotte. Melchior. I am going to work now. Listen well to your nanny and be good children.”

“Yes, Mother. Bye-bye.”

I spoke to my children in the morning as always, hugging them both before standing up and reluctantly leaving the room. Every time I saw their cute smiles, the fact that I could not do the same for Wilfried sent a pang of regret through my chest.

Cursed be his grandmother...

The very moment two seasons had passed—the time period during which it was considered essential for mothers to feed their children directly—Veronica had snatched Wilfried away to raise him herself. From then until his baptism, Wilfried had been in a position where I could only hug him at dinner.

“I suppose I should be grateful that I regained the ability to raise him at all...” I mused.

I had Rozemyne to thank for that; she was the reason that Veronica—the woman who had antagonized me from my wedding day, complaining that Sylvester was supposed to have taken his first wife from Ahrensbach—was imprisoned. Plus, she had produced such an endless stream of popular trends that shifting the allegiances of noblewomen in the subsequent fallout became simple work.

But not even that was the most important thing Rozemyne had done for me: she had also saved Wilfried from being disinherited after he failed to receive the upbringing necessary of a member of the archducal family. In my eyes, she was less the saint of Ehrenfest, and more my very own saint. My savior.

I had doubted my ears when Sylvester said that he would be adopting a daughter from Karstedt, considering it could hardly be said that he was raising his own children properly. But Rozemyne’s extraordinary qualities became obvious as soon as I met her. She was beautiful, had an immense

quantity of mana, astonishing quick-thinking skills, a knack for conceptualizing new inventions that instantly became trends, the motivation to actually create those inventions, and a deeply compassionate heart. She also was so feeble that she seemed to end up on the verge of death if one so much as looked away from her for a moment. Working quickly to secure and protect her for the duchy's sake was a rare instance of Sylvester making a very wise decision, in my opinion.

Today, I would be having a tea party with Georgine, our visitor from Ahrensbach. Sylvester had begged me to attend alongside him, and while I agreed, I could hardly say I was particularly enthusiastic about it.

I already struggle to face her because of how much she resembles Veronica. And not to mention...

"I am quite concerned about the smile Lady Georgine gave Wilfried during her welcoming feast. It simply will not leave my mind."

"You're right to be nervous about it, Florencia. I'm going to make sure Wilfried doesn't see her again, so seeing her off will be the last time they meet. Same goes for Rozemyne, too, of course."

It concerned me that Sylvester was so on guard against Georgine, considering how soft he usually was on his family. I still could not believe how long he had allowed Bezewanst and Veronica to wreak havoc.

"Sylvester, why is it that you are so guarded against Georgine?"

"I don't want my children to go through what I did," he said, going on to explain that, while he was struggling with the intense upbringing demanded of the next aub, his older sister Georgine had tormented him endlessly. "Looking back, I can understand how she must have felt when her whole life was taken from her and all her efforts disrespected. But from when I moved to the northern building after my baptism to when she departed for Ahrensbach, she never stopped antagonizing me."

While Sylvester was outwardly maintaining his calm, I could tell that the years of torment had left gaping wounds in his heart. The trauma from his childhood had yet to fade.

Goodness, this man... He truly is an overgrown child, having been raised with his mother's distorted love but never given help when he truly needed it.

"Take this and follow us," Sylvester instructed an attendant, gesturing toward a box. He then stood up, prompting me to stand as well. "Guess I've

gotta speak to Georgine about Bezewanst and Mother. This isn't going to be fun."

"I know only a fraction of the circumstances, and having an outsider such as myself intervene in family matters will simply throw the discussion into chaos. This duty is yours and yours alone, Sylvester. But I will be there with you, so please stay strong."

With that, I gave Sylvester a kiss on the cheek, hoping to raise his spirits as much as I could. We made our way to the tea party arm in arm, sitting next to one another when we arrived, and with Georgine seated across from us, the proceeding began.

Sylvester did not wish to reveal Ehrenfest's growing assets to Ahrensbach, and so we were serving traditional fallold honey pies as sweets. They were made with honey-soaked fallold filling, and when cut into, they would often fall apart in a way that made them visually unappealing. Nobles used this opportunity to show off just how skilled their attendants were, having them expertly slice the sweets in a way that preserved their beauty before serving them. Eating them gracefully was equally as important, being an essential skill for any fine noblewoman. Rozemyne would have her chefs make them in bite-sized pieces to begin with, but this was its more traditional form.

Focusing on my hands, I deftly cut into the pie with my cutlery before taking a demonstrative bite for Georgine. Doing so actually made me feel a little nostalgic, since I had quite regularly been enjoying Rozemyne's recipes as of late.

"Sylvester, you do know that I came here to visit our uncle's grave, correct? How long do you intend to make me wait before taking me there?" Georgine asked, shooting him a stern look with an elegantly furrowed brow as she sipped her tea.

Sylvester briefly glanced over at me for assistance, but then clenched his fists and looked Georgine head-on. "Our uncle was executed as a criminal. Count Groschel, the patriarch of his home family, has said that they are in no way responsible for someone who had been removed from their family for the temple so many decades ago. Their refusal means he has no grave."

"Executed, you say...?" Georgine asked. She had been informed of Bezewanst's death by a letter from the temple, but knew no more than that. We had of course hidden such details during the Archduke Conference,

since it could hardly be made public that one of our family members had waited for the aub's absence before deliberately stirring up trouble.

Georgine clenched her fists, fixing Sylvester with a harsh glare that made it clear she was demanding answers. He stiffened, grinding his teeth at the sight, before taking a deep breath and putting on the stern expression of an archduke.

"He disobeyed my orders and prompted my mother to forge official documents, allowing a noble of another duchy into the city—an act that devolved into violence and caused conflict."

I could see his fist shaking on his lap as he spoke. I slid my hand over his, turning it over so that I could intertwine our fingers.

Sylvester. Everything will be okay.

As I stroked his hand with my thumb, I could feel the tension drain from him ever so slightly.

"I am confident that, as the first wife of Ahrensbach, you must know how grave of a crime it is for the archduke's seal to be used while he is absent for the Archduke Conference," Sylvester continued. "Please. I want you to understand."

Georgine lowered her eyes, let out a thin sigh, and then slowly raised her head. "Despite my sorrow, I understand that you had no choice but to execute him. Did you save any of his belongings, Sylvester?"

"I have much under my possession. You may take whatever you like."

"Yes, I believe I shall."

It appeared the box Sylvester had made his attendant carry contained Bezewanst's former belongings.

"The box inside also contains the letters you sent him. He stored and treasured every single one in the temple. Ferdinand sent them to me the other day."

"Oh my, you read those? How embarrassing." Georgine gave a small smile before taking out the box of letters and an ornately decorated ink bottle. "Goodness... To think Uncle used this until the very end," she whispered.

Judging by her response, it was safe to say that she had gifted Bezewanst the ink bottle before being married away to Ahrensbach. Her eyes crinkled nostalgically as she looked over it, and the look on her face as she touched the bundled-up letters gave her the countenance of an

exceptionally loving woman. The kind smile she wore appeared so genuine that it made the cold grin she had given Wilfried and the abuse she had forced upon Sylvester almost come across as uncharacteristic mistakes of some kind.

I only ever met with the High Bishop during ceremonies, and despite Bezewanst not even being a noble, he had joined Veronica in lecturing me at length about “the duties of a wife,” so it was safe to say that my feelings toward him were by no means fond ones. He was considered such a disgrace that even his own family rejected his remains following his execution, so at the very least, it was relieving to know that *someone* in the world cared for him.

“He committed the crime by enlisting Mother’s help, then? Where is she now? I thought it strange that she was not present during the welcoming feast, but it would not have been proper to ask about her there.”

“She’s being imprisoned for the same crime. Right now, she’s in the forest’s Ivory Tower.”

“I would like to meet with her.”

Sylvester’s scowl deepened as he shook his head; those who had committed treason against the archduke were not allowed visitors, to prevent both escape and murder. “She committed treason. You can’t see her.”

“I am not suggesting that we speak to one another. I simply wish to see with my own eyes the conditions she is living in. Surely you understand that a child would naturally want to see their mother. Would you not make the same request if you were in my position?” Georgine asked, glaring at him. “I am the first wife of Ahrensbach. She may be my mother, but I would not help a criminal charged with such a grave crime to escape, nor would I ask for her punishment to be lessened.”

“...I will permit you to see her, but only if you wear schtappe-sealing bracelets.”

Schtappe-sealing bracelets were magic tools put on nobles who had committed crimes, and as the name implied, they sealed away one’s schtappe such that they could not cast magic. Sylvester was indirectly refusing Georgine by saying that she would need to undergo the same restrictions as a criminal, but she merely gave him a cool smile and extended her shapely wrists.

“Very well, then.”

With a bitter frown, Sylvester secured a bracelet around each of Georgine’s wrists. He might have been remembering the time he put them onto his own mother.

And so, we took Georgine to the Ivory Tower. It stretched above the nobles’ forest, existing to seal away nobles who had committed treason against the archduke. Upon our arrival, we headed for the door that was farthest inside. Aside from the bars, the room behind it was just like that of any other noble, with Veronica sitting inside wearing a pair of schtappe-sealing bracelets just like the ones on Georgine.

Veronica looked up at the sound of the opening door, then abruptly got to her feet and raced over to the bars. “Georgine!” Despite being imprisoned, she was still the archduke’s mother, so she wasn’t being mistreated in the slightest; both her clothes and hair were finely done, like always. “You must return Sylvester to his senses, Georgine. Tell him to let me out. Ferdinand is manipulating him! Please, Georgine! Save me!”

Georgine listened quietly to her mother’s desperate pleas, then turned away. Her promise had been to see Veronica without saying a word, and she kept it.

“...That will be enough, Sylvester.”

Sylvester nodded silently and started to walk away, with Georgine and me following behind him. But Veronica’s cries did not stop. “Georgine! GEORGINE!” she wailed.

Soon enough, Georgine stopped and turned around, meeting my gaze with a smile. “I am just glad to have seen my mother again. My apologies for forcing this onto you, Florencia.”

“Think nothing of it. I understand how concerned you must be.”

Her eyes then shifted slowly to Veronica, who was continuing to scream, and the smile on her lips changed ever so slightly. This smile was far from one of relief, and the sight alone sent a chill down my spine.

“Thank you for coming.”

Today I was having a tea party with Elvira, who had been entrusted with playing the role of Rozemyne’s mother. She had given me much support since I first married Sylvester back in the day; I knew little about Ehrenfest when I married into the duchy from Frenbeltag, but she taught me much of

the culture here, allowed me to enter her faction, and protected me throughout no matter what happened.

Though I would never tell Sylvester that I find Elvira to be more reliable than him... He would get ever so jealous.

Once the tea and sweets were prepared, I sent away our attendants and extended a sound-blocking magic tool to Elvira, since we absolutely could not risk anyone hearing us. I silently brought my tea to my lips, took a sweet, and then offered one to my guest, who likewise sipped her drink.

"This is about Lady Georgine, I imagine?" she said with a gentle smile after setting down her teacup.

"It is. I imagine you know a lot more about this matter than I do, Elvira. My apologies for always relying on you so heavily."

"Oh, there is no need to apologize—after all, our faction exists to help its members. I must say, though, Lady Georgine has been quite active during her time here. Just yesterday, she attended a tea party held by the former Lady Veronica faction," she said with an exasperated, though somewhat impressed, sigh. Veronica's faction had rapidly lost influence following her imprisonment, but Georgine's visit was reviving their momentum rapidly and without warning.

"Her faction abounds with nobles connected to Ahrensbach, correct? They are all desperate to deepen their bonds with Lady Georgine, and if she intends to exert her influence here, meeting with old friends is going to prove essential."

The connection between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach had weakened considerably with Veronica's arrest, so it was possible that Georgine was looking to strengthen her connections with houses that would support her now that she was her duchy's first wife.

"It seems that Viscountess Dahldolf told her many things indeed at yesterday's tea party," Elvira said. "I must say... I am worried for Rozemyne."

"Viscountess Dahldolf? The mother of the knight executed about two years ago for disobeying orders?"

"Indeed. Lord Ferdinand ordered the knight to protect Rozemyne, an apprentice blue shrine maiden at the time, but he instead wounded her with a schtappe and threw the entire situation into chaos. He was a fool, and she is his unfortunate mother."

The viscountess had spread rather malicious rumors about Rozemyne—that was what Elvira had been told by one of her laynoble allies.

“Do you remember that Viscountess Dahldolf was quite close to the former High Bishop, who asserted to all who would listen that Rozemyne was a commoner?”

“Yes, I seem to recall her often asking Bezewanst for assistance after her son entered the temple. Bezewanst was Lady Veronica’s only brother from the same mother, after all.”

Elvira frowned in concern. “If there were nothing more to all this, then the disobedient knight would clearly be at fault, and there would be nothing for us to worry about,” she said, lowering her eyes before speaking again. “Rozemyne is deeply connected to the death of not only Viscountess Dahldolf’s son, but Bezewanst as well. Aub Ehrenfest is firmly denying all rumors that she is a commoner, but there is no way to hide her involvement in Bezewanst’s death. I have no idea whatsoever how this knowledge will make Lady Georgine feel, nor what she will decide to do about it.”

A sigh escaped me as I remembered how Georgine had looked while holding Bezewanst’s belongings. It was hard to imagine her eventual emotional outpour not being directed at Rozemyne.

“So, Elvira... I did attend the Royal Academy while Lady Georgine was there, briefly, but when it comes to people from Ehrenfest, I must admit that I only remember Constanze. From your perspective, what kind of person is Lady Georgine?”

There were gatherings for archduke candidates within the Royal Academy, so while I had certainly crossed paths with Lady Georgine before, I barely remembered anything about her. Perhaps that was due to the age difference between juniors and seniors, or because Constanze had so thoroughly doted on me after becoming romantically involved with my older brother.

“She is prideful and a hard worker, but perhaps due to sharing Lady Veronica’s blood, she shows no mercy whatsoever toward those she deems her enemies. It was for this reason that she mercilessly tormented Lord Sylvester when he was young in an attempt to ostracize him. Such behavior is of course not uncommon among siblings who are fighting for the seat of archduke, but even so...

“Lord Sylvester, at such a young age, was given the position purely

based on his gender, which led to Lady Georgine's engagement being canceled and her getting married off to Ahrensbach as a third wife. I can only imagine how humiliating that must have been, and I understand her feelings entirely. But the hatred she unleashed upon a child who had only just been baptized was nothing but cruel. Lord Karstedt struggled much when dealing with her."

"Indeed. Ruling archdukes are generally preferable to ruling archduchesses," I replied. It was important for a mother to preserve her mana to ensure that her children had a bountiful supply themselves, and for this reason, they were required to refrain from using mana as much as possible while pregnant. This was the explanation behind an archduke being able to marry any woman he wished so long as they possessed an equivalent mana quantity, while an archduchess absolutely needed to marry an archduke candidate.

"Tradition and circumstances will in no way ease whatever emotions Lady Georgine feels right now. We must exercise the utmost caution for Lord Wilfried, who so greatly resembles Lord Sylvester, and Rozemyne, who ultimately caused Bezewanst's downfall whether it was in self-defense or not. Lady Georgine is the type to immediately home in on any weakness she sees," Elvira explained. Her description truly did remind me of Veronica; I could imagine that they had quite similar temperaments.

"So we must be on guard against Lady Georgine wielding her power as Ahrensbach's first wife against us..."

"Indeed, that would be wise. She did not return home to Ehrenfest a single time while third wife, but the moment she gained power, she descended upon our duchy once again."

No matter how powerful of a greater duchy Ahrensbach was, a third wife did not deal in politics and would be of a lower status than Ehrenfest's archduke. Elvira was insinuating that Lady Georgine had returned specifically because she was now a first wife, making her powerful enough that even Sylvester had to kneel before her. I was immediately reminded of how his fist had trembled just from facing and speaking to her.

"I must stay strong as well..."

After staying in Ehrenfest for a week, it was finally time for Lady Georgine to return to Ahrensbach. We all lined up to see her off, Rozemyne

and Wilfried included, then began our lengthy farewells.

“I must thank you for having me here,” Georgine said.

“If your visit brought any peace at all to your heart, Lady Georgine, then I am overjoyed beyond words.”

I had been cautious for so long that I honestly felt a little relieved at the thought she would finally be gone. And as if to exploit the one moment when my guard was down, Wilfried dashed forward with a smile.

“We didn’t get to talk much this time, Auntie. I hope we can spend more time together soon!”

He had leapt from my blind spot, moving so fast that I had no opportunity to stop him.

Georgine’s lips curved into a grin at the suggestion. “I see. I had no idea that you wished to speak with me more. In that case... perhaps I should return next year, at around this same time?”

“Yes, please! I can’t wait!”

Wilfried, no! Whyever would you say that?!

I was struck with the urge to scornfully pinch his cheek, but now was neither the time nor place for that. Instead, I clasped my hands together and somehow managed to keep a smile forced onto my face, at which point Lady Georgine looked at me and gracefully tilted her head.

“It would not be a bother for me to accept this invitation, would it?” she asked.

In truth, I wished to reply, *“It would be quite the bother indeed,”* but I dared not speak so frankly. In a public setting such as this, there was only one answer I could possibly give.

“Not at all. We would love to see you again soon.”

Wilfried... you foolish boy!

Once Georgine’s carriage was out of sight, I spun around and saw that Ferdinand was already glaring down at him, the gentle smile that was previously plastered on his face having disappeared entirely. He handed some strange fan made out of white paper to Rozemyne.

“Do it, Rozemyne.”

In an instant, she brought the fan down on my imprudent son’s head with a pleasant cracking sound. “You big idiot! You shouldn’t have said that! Learn to read the mood!” I applauded her in my heart, for she had said exactly what I planned to say myself.

For the sake of Ehrenfest's future, perhaps it is time I deeply consider having Wilfried and Rozemyne marry...

Damuel's Proposal

As the Starbind Ceremony came to a close, Lady Rozemyne, having given a beautiful blessing as the High Bishop, gracefully exited the hall. When the doors closed behind her, the atmosphere immediately became more adult: those who had already determined their partners introduced them to their parents and wider family, while those still searching received introductions from their guardians or grouped up with friends to meet new people. It was largely those inheriting their houses who received such introductions from their guardians, while second sons and such spent this time with their friends.

I personally needed to stay with Lady Elvira to debut the dress Lady Rozemyne had designed for me, so I didn't have the opportunity to spend this time casually with my friends. They had clamored with excitement over my new outfit before I saw them off with well wishes.

"May the Goddess of Marriage bless you all."

"And may you be blessed as well, Brigitte."

But as I started making my way out, the voice of Aub Ehrenfest reverberated through the hall. "Silence! I have an important announcement to make today."

I looked over just as the archduke announced that Lord Ferdinand, who was standing on the stage beside him, would be returning to noble society. It was just as Lady Rozemyne had informed us.

This news excited a commotion among the nobility. Lady Veronica had forced Lord Ferdinand into the temple after years of pushing for his expulsion, so the aub allowing his return signaled that he was willfully ignoring her wishes. Those who had also earned the woman's ire gleefully raised their schtappes in support, while those who had supported her raised their schtappes as well, albeit while facing the floor and wearing tight frowns.

Seeing the relative power of the faction change so drastically before my eyes caused a gasp to escape my lips, at which point Lady Elvira smoothly stepped behind me. “Brigitte, straighten your back and smile,” she warned with a quiet whisper. “The nobles in the Veronica faction will dramatically lose influence with this announcement and the confirmation that Lord Ferdinand is now Rozemyne’s guardian. They will need to search for new, higher-status nobles to support them, which means that many will approach you with the intention of getting closer to Rozemyne. You must not allow their pressure to overwhelm you, nor should you concede to them.”

I scanned the hall to see countless eyes already fixed on me from among the crowd. The nobles my age who had just moments ago looked upon my dress fondly now had cold, calculating stares. There was more attention on me than I had ever experienced before.

As I stood in place, taken aback by the sudden change, a young man began making his way over. A familiar voice called out, but it was addressing Lady Elvira, not me. A chill ran down my spine, and I spun around just in time to see him bow his head as he started to greet her.

...Hassheit?!

It was my former fiancé. He was at first glance a genial young man with a bright smile, but in truth, his eyes showed no such kindness. His expression was just as I remembered it, and the sight alone made my hair stand on end.

“It seems that the Goddess of Time has woven the threads of Brigitte’s and my fate together once again. I ask for your blessing on this day enriched with the King and Queen gods’ divine protection,” he said, trying to weasel his way into a blessing by speaking solely to Lady Elvira. But while she was currently serving as my guardian, she was purely supporting me with my dress debut; she was in no position to discuss marriage on my behalf.

“Not even the Goddess of Marriage plays her tricks on a night protected by the King and Queen gods,” Lady Elvira responded, indirectly stating that she would permit him to speak to me but only under her strict watch. She then took a step back, positioning herself such that she could watch us carefully. Hassheit was limited in what actions he could take with her so close by, and that alone gave me a great deal of strength.

I carefully looked around to see that gossip-loving nobles were all

gazing our way, and in the distance, I spotted my brother weaving his way through the crowd to reach us.

Please don't, brother...

I speedily raised a hand to stop him. As was obvious from the result of my previous engagement being canceled, were my brother the giebe to fail at dealing with Hassheit properly here, it would be our province that suffered the consequences—an outcome that needed to be avoided at all costs now that we were on the cusp of getting Lady Rozemyne's support.

After confirming that my brother had stopped despite his worried expression, I faced my former fiancé directly. "Lord Hassheit, what business might you have with me?"

"Brigitte, aren't you acting rather cold toward the man who, on the night of the Starbinding, just asked your guardian for permission to speak with you? When the threads that the Goddess of Marriage wove together for us were so tragically torn asunder, my heart froze over as though the God of Blizzards had struck me himself..."

Hassheit maintained that I had ended our engagement without even giving him a reason, breaking his heart for some selfish purpose. But in truth, I had ended it because he and his family were plotting to remove my brother from his seat and take the position of Giebe Illgner for themselves. And now here he was, lowering his gaze with a pained expression to draw the sympathies of our audience. His boldfaced lies just made me furious.

"Lord Hassheit, you—"

"Brigitte?"

No sooner had I opened my mouth to rebuke him than Lady Elvira called out from behind, snapping me back to my senses. While she was watching us quietly, she was standing proudly with a composed smile that exuded control. Her warning for me to keep my back straight and continue smiling flashed through my mind.

...Right. I must not be overwhelmed. I must not fall victim to his ploy.

A newfound calmness swiftly washed over me. Getting emotional here in public with so many onlookers would only give Hassheit a weakness to exploit. Were all of noble society to learn that my brother, a giebe, had been tricked and exploited, even more opportunistic nobles would come after Illgner; everything I had done to protect it thus far would have been for naught. And so I mimicked Lady Elvira's smile, masking the anger that was

stirring inside me.

“Brigitte, despite all the blows you have landed upon me, my rafel has not yet fallen. I still see you as Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, as I always have.”

While his words may have sounded like *“I still love you despite how much you’ve hurt me”* to those watching on, Hassheit was actually saying that he was still after Illgner. Even now he was mocking me, using euphemisms that hid his intentions from everyone else. He was deriding my province for having dropped in power when countless nobles left us following my canceled engagement, calling me a fool who had missed her chance to seize the position of giebe from my own brother while scorning him as an incompetent failure who had been so easily fooled.

But Illgner will not remain in its current state. Not now that Lady Rozemyne is giving us her support.

Oh, how I yearned to rub his face in that fact. But it was still days before Lady Rozemyne would formally request for paper to be made in Illgner. From the perspective of other nobles, our province was not receiving any support from her, and such information about this new industry was not mine to share.

“No matter how frail and emaciated Geduldh becomes, Ewigeliebe the God of Life never ceases to long for her touch. But it is only he who desires her, no one else. It is unlikely that Lady Rozemyne, your Goddess of Water, will continue to protect you for much longer,” Hassheit said, maintaining his fake noble smile as he continued his stealthy barrage of abuse.

He was saying that no other man would ask for my hand in marriage now that Illgner was struggling with fewer nobles and I was seen as prone to ending engagements. And while I served as Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight and had her support now, I would need to retire upon getting married, as all female knights do. Even considering that I had served her for a year now, few expected the archducal family to continue associating with me for very long after my retirement.

Hassheit spoke with the aim of discouraging those nobles who were seeking me for a connection with Lady Rozemyne, but I knew that she was not such a dispassionate person; she cared even for the orphans in the temple, and she treated both her attendants and commoner merchants well.

“Brigitte, I ask that you once again accept my rafel, so that I may restore

your wounded honor."

I have no interest in receiving any so-called "honor" from you.

But no matter how strongly I wanted to voice such thoughts, I couldn't allow my true feelings to show; revealing them here would ruin the fashion debut that Lady Rozemyne had entrusted me with. But I couldn't think of a good way to refuse Hassheit in polite noble language. All I could do in response was press my lips together and clench my fists.

"Oh, were you always such a poor theologian, Lord Hassheit?" came a mocking voice as several male knights stepped out from the crowd. I recognized them as Damuel's friends—a group who had found the Raise Angelica's Grade Squadron so amusing that they agreed to help out by joining us for gewinnen—and watched on as they quickly positioned themselves between Hassheit and me. "There were many who continued to yearn for Geduldh, no matter how emaciated she became. Need I even mention that not only the Goddess of Water, but the God of Fire, Goddess of Wind, and even the King and Queen gods themselves worried for the Goddess of Earth and set out in search of her?"

"Indeed. Despite your bold assertions, the truth is quite the opposite," another knight continued. "There were more gods who thought of Geduldh when she was in poor health than not."

"You have no need to fear for Brigitte's sake, Lord Hassheit. You are not the only man who finds her attractive. Go on, Damuel. Now's your time to shine."

The knights pushed Damuel to the front of the group in an instant, at which point his gaze wandered anxiously through the crowd. Despite me doing my best to hide my emotions, it seemed they had picked up on my dissatisfaction. I instinctively placed a sheepish hand on my cheek; there was nothing more embarrassing than accidentally allowing others to see how frustrated I was.

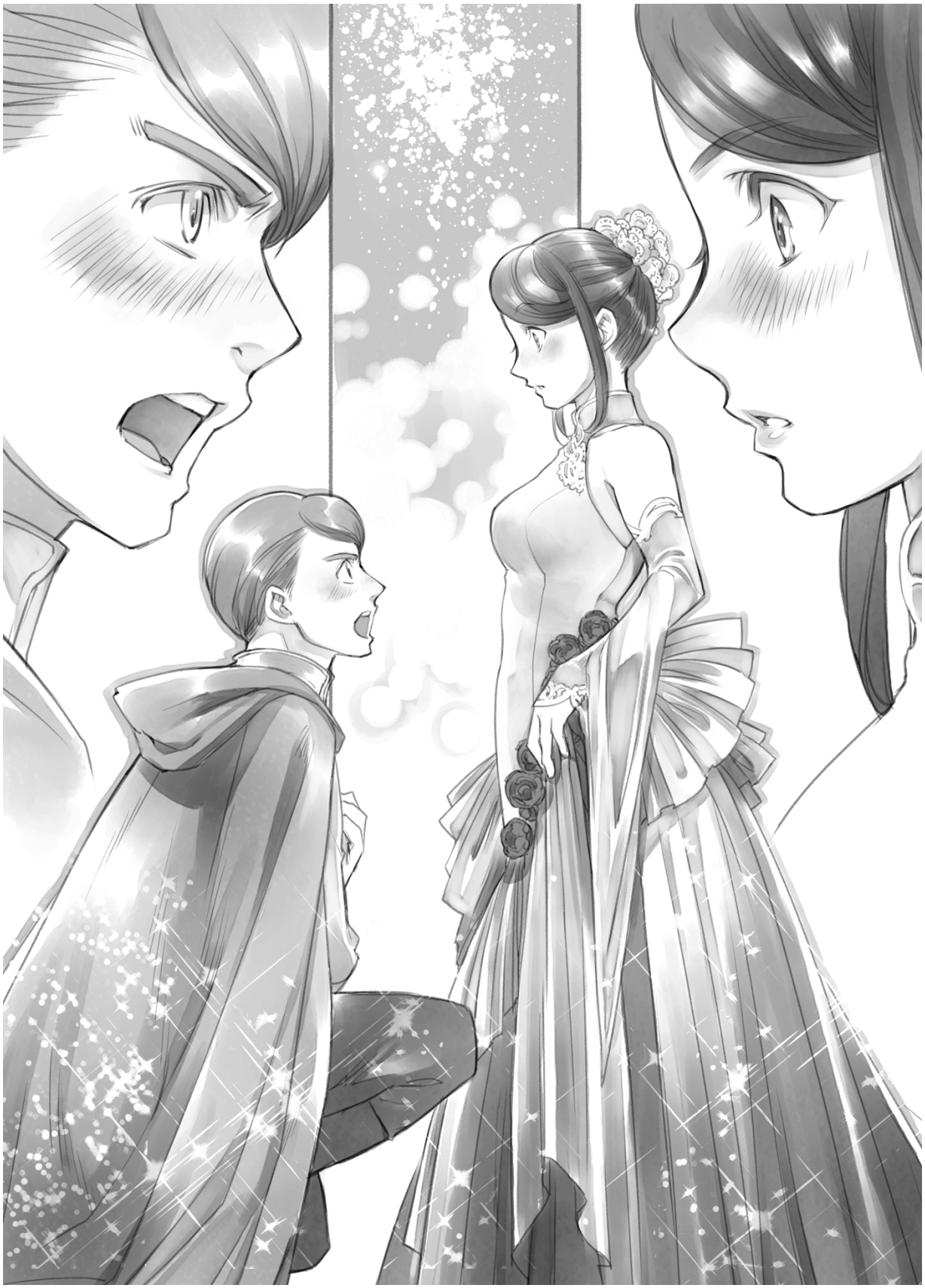
Hassheit, seeing Damuel now standing between us, let out an exasperated sigh. "You have no place here, laynoble. Brigitte is a mednoble. You aren't getting cocky simply because Lady Rozemyne took you on as a retainer, are you? Know your place."

Damuel had been awkwardly scanning his surroundings, but the moment he heard those last words, a bright glint lit his gray eyes. He straightened his back and faced Hassheit head-on with a cool gaze. "I was once punished

for *knowing my place* and standing down. But as a knight, I must stand firm when there is someone to protect, and never again shall I turn my back on what is my duty."

With that, he turned around, kneeling before me and extending a hand.

"My fate crossed yours at the guidance of the King and Queen gods, who rule the heavens far above. I wish for you to be my Goddess of Light, Brigitte."



The proposal came as such a shock that I could do nothing but blink in surprise. It was unthinkable for Damuel to ask my hand in marriage, both in terms of status and mana quantity. I was aware he had developed feelings for me to at least some degree, but he was no fool—he knew that it was simply not possible for us to be together, and him not voicing his affections before now was more than proof of that.

And yet here he was, proposing in a public setting, of all places. I had no choice but to refuse; given the disparity between us, an official marriage proposal simply could not survive. But as I looked down at him in a daze, he flashed a smile.

"...I understand that receiving this proposal from a laynoble will only be unsettling to you. Thus, I proclaim that by next year I will have developed my mana quantity such that it is a proud match for yours. All I ask is that you accept no other proposals until then."

Ah... So he is doing this to save me from my current situation...

Damuel had himself addressed the mana imbalance between us, and by asking me to wait one year, he had given me enough leeway that I didn't need to refuse him. I could spurn Hassheit's proposal and be free of this mess.

"My sincerest apologies, Lord Hassheit. It seems that there are indeed other men who would yearn for the emaciated Geduldh. The Goddess of Time will unfortunately never weave the threads of our fates together again, but I nonetheless pray that you live well with the divine protection of the gods," I said, quashing his chances of ever speaking to me again. I then placed my hands over Damuel's. "Your proposal has brought much joy to my heart. I shall be here waiting one year from now."

An impressed stir ran through the crowd. Nobody believed that a laynoble such as Damuel could develop his mana quantity enough to make him compatible with the younger sister of a giebe such as myself, but my accepting his proposal sent a message to all those watching that I had firmly rejected Hassheit for the rest of time.

With Damuel's hand in mine, I stood up and walked over to Lady Elvira. "I wish to go and speak with Giebe Illgner, if you would allow me."

"But of course," she said, a satisfied smile on her face. "You have just accepted a man's yearning love; my duty as your guardian is now complete. I shall keep an eye on Hassheit's response for you. Go forth to Giebe

Illgner.” It seemed she had appraised my behavior as suitably graceful for a guard knight serving Lady Rozemyne, which was a considerable relief.

“Lady Elvira, I owe you much.”

“Think nothing of it. I simply look forward to next year,” she teased with a refined giggle.

And so, with the group of knights protectively circling us, I led Damuel by the hand over to my brother. Even from a distance, I could tell he was a little relieved.

“Brigitte...”

“Brother, forgive me for acting on my own there,” I said. I had stopped him from getting closer when he was visibly concerned and accepted Damuel’s proposition on my own, ignoring the will of my house’s head both times.

“It’s quite alright. Things ended better than they would have had I jumped in,” he said, accepting my apology. He then looked toward Damuel. “You have my gratitude for bringing a peaceful end to that conflict, and for protecting my sister’s honor.”

“Indeed. You truly saved me there, Damuel. I thank you ever so much.”

As my brother and I thanked him, Damuel floundered so much that it was hard to imagine he was the same man who had just so boldly faced Hassheit. His eyes flitted all over the place.

“Er, well... I did have a lot of help. I could only stand there because I had my friends with me, so, um... I’ll be taking my leave now.”

Then, as if to say that his job here was done, Damuel spun around and sped back to his friends. They teasingly jabbed him with their elbows as they walked away.

“If only he were a mednoble... Do you not think the same, Brigitte?”

“Goodness, brother... Damuel said all that only to assist me,” I chided. The gossipy nobles seemed beyond excited to see how this would turn out next year, but I strongly doubted he could actually increase his mana quantity enough to make a marriage between us possible.

When the Starbinding was over, pretty much every person I knew teased me endlessly. But Damuel himself showed no signs of pursuing a romance, and so I returned to my normal life without taking his proposal very seriously at all. That is, until we made our journey to Illgner.

Lady Rozemyne had selected Illgner as the first province in which she would develop the paper-making industry, and so I returned home as her guard knight. Once there, she considerately gave me temporary leave of duty to spend time with my family, though our stay would be brief.

The next day, I was serving as Lady Rozemyne's guard knight, accompanying her to the mountains so that we could gather materials. Then back at the mansion, I welcomed her as a member of the giebe's family.

It was when night fell that one of the servants assigned to Damuel came to me with something to say. "Lady Brigitte, I do not know why, but Lord Damuel has gone outside despite the late hour..."

It was already some time past seventh bell. The young Lady Rozemyne was already asleep, of course, and it was late enough that the generally early-to-bed-and-early-to-rise residents of our province had all retired. Why exactly would Damuel be going out at this time of night? It wasn't something that I was exactly proud of, but there were so few nobles in Illgner that there wasn't exactly much one could do.

If it was his intention to cause trouble then, as a knight, I needed to stop him before anything happened. I clad myself in light armor and stepped onto the balcony. Illgner was beneath the control of the God of Darkness, and with only the moon and stars providing light, I could easily see Damuel's ivory highbeast and the glow of mana radiating from it. I chased after him on my own highbeast.

"Damuel."

"Brigitte? What brings you out at this hour? This may be your home province, but a woman shouldn't be out alone."

I had followed after Damuel, uneasy about what he may have been planning, but he responded so casually that it made any tension immediately drain from my body.

"One of the servants told me you left. What exactly are you doing out here?"

"Ah, my apologies. I didn't mean to worry you. The truth is... Lady Rozemyne gave me some combat advice this afternoon, when we were hunting the effons. I wanted to train a little, so..." With that, he trailed off, awkwardly averting his gaze.

I widened my eyes in surprise. Lady Rozemyne wasn't even a knight, and yet she had given him advice on how to fight? "What advice was that,

exactly?”

“It was about mana usage. I’m a laynoble, so I’m used to supporting other knights. My job is usually to fight the smaller enemies while everyone else gets the big ones, or buying time for my allies to heal—that kind of thing. And providing support like that means I’ve gotten used to using as little mana as possible so that I can fight longer. I’d never even considered a fighting style where I use a lot of mana at once, but Lady Rozemyne said that I should learn, so... here I am.”

It made sense that Damuel would have a combat style focused on fighting for as long as possible while conserving his mana; matching our mana usage to our enemy was also the first thing we medknights were taught to do.

“If that’s your goal, then you should practice filling your schtappe with a swell of mana. That’s what apprentice medknights learn in the Knight’s Order.”

And so, I landed my highbeast in the forest clearing and trained with Damuel. But something took me by surprise—it somehow felt as though he had more mana than before.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“It seems that your mana quantity has grown a little. Has it...?”

Damuel hesitated for a moment, his eyes wavering. Only once he had checked to make sure nobody was listening did he shyly answer. “As it turns out... my mana growth period is lasting a bit longer than most. The commander told me that it continues to develop, even now.”

Never had I expected this; one’s mana capacity generally stopped increasing in size once they came of age and stopped growing themselves.

Could it be...?

“Damuel, are you sincerely intending to match my mana capacity by next year?” I asked. Had his proposal on the night of the Starbinding been genuine, and not simply a show to force Hassheit to stand down?

In response, Damuel gave something of a weak smile. “I know you didn’t take my proposal seriously, and I’m still not sure whether my mana capacity will grow enough to match yours... but I don’t want to give up,” he said, exhaling beside me as we trained.

I glanced in his direction, and what I saw immediately stirred my heart. When he turned to face me, I found myself unable to look away from his

deep gray eyes.

“And that’s why I want to ask you again: if our mana capacities do match, will you accept my proposal? I want to prepare myself, before you refuse me in public.”

My heart pounded in earnest as I was caught up in his deadly serious gaze. But at the same time, warning bells were ringing in my head. I knew not to trust men so easily, and the things Hassheit had once told me soon began to run through my mind.

“Illgner has nothing at all going for it, and yet you refuse to change that. What man would want to marry you when the seat of giebe is right there and you aren’t even trying to take it? And you, personally? Worthless. There’d be nothing good about marrying into your family. Do you seriously *think any man would want to marry into such a country bumpkin province? That’s hilarious.”*

His words reminded me of the way everyone had reacted when I canceled our engagement to protect Illgner. My breath caught in my throat. The memories were suffocating.

“Brigitte?”

“Damuel... what do you think of Illgner?” I asked, fixing him with a scrutinizing stare. Did he see any value in marrying into my province? That was the most important question of all to me, and I refused to accept any white lies or deflections.

“That’s a very sudden question...” he said, his gaze wandering for a moment. A smile then touched his lips, and the look in his eyes seemed to soften. “I think it’s a great place. The people are kind and genuine. The giebe has a good heart, too. A lot of people say there’s nothing here, but you now have Lady Rozemyne’s support, and it’s only a matter of time before the paper-making industry blooms. I’m sure Hassheit’s going to be cursing himself soon enough. Plus... I can feel how much more lively you are here, Brigitte. You’re even, er... You’re even cuter here than you are in the Noble’s Quarter.”

Even in the darkness, I could tell how embarrassed he was. And the feeling somehow seemed to carry over to me, too.

“*Ahem.*” Damuel cleared his throat. “Well, I answered your question. Will you answer mine? I’m still waiting on an answer.”

He hadn’t mocked Illgner for being a country province, and he accepted

me for who I was here. Plus, he was genuinely working to expand his mana quantity over the next year. What more could I ask for?

I pressed a hand against my chest to contain my racing heart and extended my other toward him. “Your proposal brought me much happiness, Damuel. I will be waiting for you at the night of next year’s Starbinding. And this time, I’m not saying it for appearances’ sake.”

Staying in Illgner

The ringing of a bell resounded through the air. It must have been designed so that the sound would travel far distances, because it was much louder than the one I was used to hearing at Ehrenfest's temple. The bell at the farmers' winter mansion rang in turn, as if responding to the giebe's, and so my day in Illgner began with a distant and a nearby bell chiming together.

"Morning, Lutz. Is Damian up yet?" I asked. Damian was so used to being woken up by attendants that first bell wasn't always enough to get him out of bed.

Lutz chuckled. "When's the last time he overslept? He's been getting up at first bell with us for days now."

"It's when you get too used to things that you let your guard down, and that's when you're most likely to mess up. Lady Rozemyne warned me about that herself."

"Oh yes, Gil, she always did say something like that whenever you messed up," Selim interjected. I shot him a glare in response, and with that, we headed for the river with our washbasins in hand.

A short climb down a hill beside the giebe's mansion led us to a smallish river, where we washed our faces, cleaned ourselves, and overall got ready for the day. Despite it being summer, the sun had only just risen, so the water was pretty cold. Lutz was always like, "*Why not just wait until the afternoon?*" but in the temple it was an important tradition to take care of such matters in the morning.

"Alright, that's done. Damian, you've still got bubbles on your stuff. You've gotta scrub harder."

Once we were cleaned and ready, we used our washbasins as buckets for scooping up water. Just like in the temple, our first job of the morning was to fill the water jugs in the side building's kitchen. Otherwise, we would need to walk all the way to the forest every time we wanted to wash our hands.

“Mornin’, outsiders. Seems like today’s fisha harvest is gonna be a good ’un. Hope you’re lookin’ forward to it,” one villager said to us. Residents of the nearby farming town were here drawing water as well, so we exchanged some idle chit-chat as we went about our work.

“Nice. I’ll ask the chef to hunt for some jour to go with ’em.”

“Sounds good, thanks. The giebe’s gonna love to hear that we’re havin’ jours tonight. Oh, and you. Big guy. You’re gonna spill half your water on the journey back if you keep waverin’ like that. Hah!”

The farmers all laughed as Damian wobbled around with his bucket of water. He had lived something close to the life of a noble with so many servants at his family home, which meant he had no experience when it came to cooking, cleaning, or washing clothes. He was having a harder time living in Illgner than anyone.

Initially, Damian’s plan had been to spend some of his own money to hire a servant in Illgner, but all the townsfolk turned him down; they had their hands full with their own jobs and now learning to make paper, so they didn’t have time to take care of someone else, too. On top of that, the trading of goods here was generally done through bartering, which meant the average citizen neither had nor needed such money in the first place.

Well, that’s what happens when there aren’t any stores here. I was real shocked when I heard that traveling merchants just do business with the giebe, who keeps everything stored in his mansion.

And so, Damian, unable to hire a servant due to how differently people viewed money here, had no choice but to care for himself. During his first three days, he was so incompetent that all the townsfolk started to wonder how he was even still alive. Sure, they were currently laughing at him for being all wobbly, but the fact they were doing that instead of just outwardly feeling sad for him was genuinely a huge improvement.

“Seems like we just need one more bucket,” I said. “Nolte, you know what to do. Selim, Damian—let’s go fill everyone’s flasks with drinking water.”

We used the river for a lot of things, but we didn’t drink from it. Instead, we filled our leather flasks that we brought to the workshop with the much sweeter mountain water from a spring behind the mansion.

Damian sighed with relief; the spring was closer than the river, and no amount of poor form could make water spill out of a capped flask. We

grabbed enough flasks for everyone, then started making our way there with Selim.

Since it would be time for breakfast when we finished drawing water, I decided it would probably be smart to have someone start preparing the food. I went ahead and tossed out the orders.

“Volk, go slice some bread. Lutz, Bartz—could you grab some milk for us?”

Lutz, who had been filling water jugs with us, responded with a nod. He dropped his now-empty washbasin and ran off to the workshop, where some fresh milk should have just been delivered. There was no breakfast in Illgner without milk.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided.”

The others followed my example and spoke their prayers before grabbing some hard bread. Breakfast was a quick meal consisting of any leftovers from the previous day’s supper, and that wasn’t just because we were visiting and hadn’t had any food prepared for us—even the giebe and his family usually ate leftovers for breakfast, since their servants had farm work to do as well.

Bleh... I miss Lady Rozemyne’s leftovers in the temple.

Illgner baked all its bread in batches once every ten days, which meant what we were having now was hard and dry to the point that it was completely inedible without first being soaked in a liquid of some kind. Every morning we spent here, I was struck with the urge to pray in thanks for the milk that came with it.

“This truly makes me yearn for Lady Rozemyne’s soup...” Nolte murmured. Since it was served everywhere back home—at the temple, the Plantin Company, and even the Othmar Company—everyone here was dreaming of the same delicious soup.

“Too bad we can’t just make it here. That’d mean leaking the recipe.”

“It’s unfortunate, yes, but we must be grateful that we can eat here rather than in the main building...” Volk added.

I gave a hard nod in agreement. We initially had our food in the mansion with the giebe’s servants so that it wouldn’t need to be brought out to us,

but Lutz had managed to negotiate for us to eat in the side building by saying that we didn't want to wrap the locals up in the temple's eating customs.

During these negotiations, he had said that I needed to eat before anyone else as one of Lady Rozemyne's attendants. That really annoyed me at first, since it came across like I was being selfish. I wasn't going to demand that Illgner mimic divine gifts, and Lutz knew from our time gathering in the forest that I didn't mind eating with everyone else, so I really hadn't been able to understand it. But when he explained that he wanted to avoid us fighting over food with the townsfolk, everything made sense. In my eyes, Illgner's way of eating kind of sucked, so I was really glad about not being dragged into it.

"Anyway, today we need to work on the inner bark. Volk, Bartz, and Selim can explain the process to everyone. Be sure to teach them to peel off the outer bark while the inner bark is boiling with the ash."

"Understood."

As we ate, we discussed who would be doing what today. Unlike in the temple workshop, here in Illgner, age was important when it came to giving orders; the adults wouldn't listen to me or Lutz, since we were still young, so teaching the locals what to do was up to the gray priests. I would simply give them instructions ahead of time, then work with Lutz on developing new types of paper using wood local to the province. Changing the amount of tororo used and keeping it all recorded wasn't possible for the illiterate townsfolk.

After finishing breakfast and washing the dishes, we cleaned the side building and workshop. They weren't nearly as large as the temple, meaning the whole process was finished relatively quickly, and as second bell was now coming up, it was time for the person on food duty to head into the kitchen.

"Damian, you're on food duty today, yeah? Seems like they're harvesting some fisha today, and they want jours to go with it. Good luck," I said, cheering him on.

But Damian just grimaced. He hated food duty more than anything else. "Why, oh why doesn't Illgner have any stores? It would be so much easier to just buy ingredients at the Othmar Company," he groaned.

The most important job of the person on food duty was gathering

ingredients for that day's meals, since there weren't any stores around that they could be bought from. The mountain had plenty of vegetables and fruit since it was summer, and hunting animals would give more than enough meat. It was surprisingly easy to fish in the river, too, and unlike the fish that could be caught near Ehrenfest, they didn't stink at all. The fact that it was so easy to get a full day's worth of ingredients was shocking to us, since we were so used to buying most of ours with money.

Preparing food Illgner-style was also pretty simple—you just chopped whatever stuff you had and cooked it. This was then flavored with salt at most, and while that kind of made us want to scream since we had so many incredible recipes in our heads that we had to keep secret, it at least meant that the meals didn't take much work to prepare.

"Would you shut up, Damian? We go through this every time you're on food duty. I mean, we get it, your grandpa runs a huge food store, but he's the one who forced us to take you here. If you've got time to complain, go out and start gathering already. You'll be working like a gray priest in no time," Lutz said, forcing a basket and knife into his hands. "This is gonna be a full day of work, alright? Be sure to look for anything that might make good tororo or paper, too."

With that, Damian slumped his shoulders and sadly exited the workshop. He'd probably come back exhausted after getting mocked to death by Illgner's children, but that too would be a good experience for him.

Well, not much he can do but try his hardest.

We were just as surprised about how different Illgner was from Ehrenfest, but we had at least spent the past two years gathering in the forest and making paper in the workshop. Damian had no such experience to draw from.

"We're here! What're we gonna do today?" Carya exclaimed, bringing several townsfolk with her to the workshop after third bell. She was a female servant working in the giebe's mansion, having been assigned to take care of us by Giebe Illgner himself, but rather than being our maid or anything like that, she mainly served as a line of communication between us and the town, doing things like informing the giebe when we needed improvements in the workshop.

Damian had in fact tried to hire Carya to be his servant, but she shot him down hard: *"The heck d'you think you are, commoner boy? You're an adult.*

You can take care of yourself." She did, at his request, ask the other townsfolk whether anyone would be willing to serve him, but the other responses he got weren't much different.

"Today we'll be boiling the inner bark in ash to bring out its whiteness. That'll take about one bell, so in the meantime, we're planning to peel off the black outer bark. Did you all bring knives?"

Volk and Bartz went to fetch the tools and ash, while Selim started explaining the process to the five townsfolk—Carya included. As this went on, Lutz, Nolte, and I made progress on the new paper, occasionally glancing their way.

"Lutz. Nolte. How'd it go?" I asked.

They grabbed the paper samples that had been drying outside and started lining them up on the table. We were experimenting with using degrova leaves in place of ediles and shram bugs, and it seemed to be working well. We touched the finished sheets and wrote on them with ink to see how they fared.

"This is a good mix for the volrin paper. Rinfin will need a bit more degrova added in. And schireis... No good, again. Looks like it just doesn't work with degrova at all," Lutz reported. Despite all the other types of wood turning into paper just fine, the schireis alone simply broke apart before it could solidify. Tweaking the recipe wouldn't matter—the materials just weren't mixing well.

As I poked at the slightly yellowed blob of transparent degrova, Nolte gathered it up alongside the bits of schireis. "Shall we give up on making it work with degrova and simply experiment with ediles and shram bugs once we return to Ehrenfest?"

"Using ediles and shram bugs might solve it, yeah, but didn't Lady Rozemyne say the paper needed to be made using stuff we can find in Illgner? Pretty sure she did," I said with a sharp frown. Given that we were setting up the workshops here, the materials needed to be found locally; we didn't have the money to import them from other provinces.

Lutz crossed his arms. "I was talking to Damian about this earlier—the white bark can be preserved once it's ready, and you can pack a ton of the stuff into a single crate. Making the paper's easier in Ehrenfest, so the bark itself might end up a hotly traded commodity for Illgner."

"So you're planning to sell the schireis bark as a product on its own?"

“Yeah. It’ll naturally have to wait until we’ve made sure it works with ediles and shram bugs, but there’s a chance it’ll end up becoming a key product for provinces that don’t have suitable trees to make paper from.”

It might not have worked with degrova, but so long as it could successfully be mixed with other ingredients, schireis bark could become an important product for Illgner to sell. My eyes widened. I hadn’t considered it from that angle at all.

“Wow... So Damian *can* be useful at times, huh? After what we’ve seen, I never thought I’d see the day.”

“He’s hardly self-sufficient, but he *is* the son of a very successful store owner. He’s got a keen eye for new products and can spot ways to make a profit in no time at all. We could learn a lot from him,” Lutz said, glancing out the window. He almost sounded a little frustrated.

“Okay, we’ll take Damian’s advice here. For now, we’ll just use schireis wood for the newbies to practice with. Nolte, try and narrow down the rinfin-degrova ratio a little more. Could you do the same thing as yesterday, but gradually add some more degrova? Make sure to note down how much that changes things.”

“Understood.” At my request, Nolte stood up and made his way to the shelf with the degrova on it.

“Gil, how about we experiment with the trauperles next?” Lutz suggested. “That old guy brought us a bunch that were ripening early, right?”

The old man who had hiked the mountain with us when Lady Rozemyne was here had given us some white trauperles, which ripened at the end of summer and apparently weren’t edible. You could get a sticky juice by crushing them.

“I’m just looking forward to working with some new stuff,” I replied. “To think we’re gonna be one step closer to the new paper...”

“Yeah, but it’s not so fun when you think about how long it’ll take us to get the recipe right.”

Lutz and I continued talking as we crushed the trauperles. The process took a surprising amount of strength thanks to their tough outer layer of skin—enough that I realized we should have gotten Nolte to help out, since he was a lot stronger than us. But all we could do was regret our mistake while crushing one fruit after another. And with each one, we got stickier

and stickier.

“Guess that should do it... These really are sticky though, huh? Get the cloth, Lutz.”

Lutz grabbed the cloth we filtered the juices through and picked out the tiny chunks of skin and fruit that were stuck in it. We then mixed our fiber water with volrin—the wood we were most used to working with—and swished it around in the smallest suketa, which we kept around for when we were doing these experiments with paper. We started off with a small amount of trauperle, using a big spoon to gradually add more until we had created five different sheets of varying thickness. We would select the best paper from among them and use that to narrow down the recipe even further, as we always did.

Fourth bell rang right as we finished laying the fifth kind of paper onto the drying bed. It was time for lunch.

“No eating until we’re done cleaning up!” I yelled. It was important to make that clear, otherwise the Illgner townsfolk would abandon their duties and rush out of the workshop on the spot.

“We know, we know! Enough with the shouting already. We get it,” Carya said, her cheeks puffed out unhappily. But it wasn’t that simple; she had been ordered by the giebe to come to the workshop each day to learn the paper-making process, but everyone else casually dropped in when they didn’t have any other work to do. *They* were the ones I was calling out to.

Once those who had practically tried to spring from the workshop finished cleaning up, I locked the door and we all headed to the giebe’s mansion. As it turned out, locking doors wasn’t something that was really done in Illgner. I’d asked Carya how else she was going to stop people from stealing things, but she just blinked at me in confusion and said, *“There aren’t any thieves here. Like, what would they even do with the stuff they took?”*

I couldn’t even argue back, since our perceptions of what was normal were just so different, but we still always locked the workshop door just in case. Plus, it might not have been an issue here, but getting ourselves into a habit of not locking doors would prove to be a big problem when we went back to Ehrenfest.

“Gil, may I have Volk carry my things so that I can go and assist Damian?” Nolte asked, sounding worried. I looked up and spotted Damian

in the distance, wobbling over on shaky legs. Everyone's lunch was in his hands, and his arms and legs looked as though they were about to give out. I instantly understood that Nolte was afraid he would drop all our food, so I gave a nod and permitted him to go and help.

"Hey, Lutz. You really think it's a good idea to put Damian on food duty this evening, too?"

Up to this point, we'd put different people on food duty for lunch and dinner. This morning, Lutz had said that Damian would need to do both himself, but it was pretty clear from a glance that this might not have been possible for him.

Lutz raised an eyebrow. "Merchants are always scheming to make things go their way. He may look exhausted, but there's more composure in his expression by the day. It's proof that he's got energy to spare. Don't fall for his tricks; there's no need to go soft on him."

And so we had our lunch of salted vegetable soup with hard bread and fresh fruit from the mountains, then returned to the workshop after sending Damian back out for dinner.

"Hey, Gil. Come look at this. Aren't these drying way too quickly?" Lutz asked, directing me to the drying bed. The paper laid out on the board to be squeezed dry was already going stiff.

"Let's try taking them outside for a bit—like, not to stick them onto the board one by one to dry, but just taking the whole drying bed outside. I wanna see what happens if we leave it out there until the evening."

Noticing that the paper made with trauperle dried unusually fast, Lutz and I took the drying bed with the experimental sheets on it outside. The paper started to whiten under the sun, and we could see it hardening before our very eyes, with the sheets made using more trauperle drying the fastest.

Lutz and I exchanged looks. "Seems like it won't even take until the evening. We should probably keep our eyes on it, huh?"

"Yeah, we can't even risk looking away. I've got a feeling the paper'll turn into something else entirely if we just leave it here."

We grabbed ink and some boards to write down any changes as they happened. The sheets started to turn all silky as they continued to dry, becoming so white that they even began reflecting the sunlight.

"Er, Lutz... Is it just me, or is this one shrinking? Looks like the first and last sheets are totally different sizes."

Out of the five sheets of paper, the one with the most trauperle was visibly shrinking as it hardened. The others would all cave in slightly when poked, leaving a small indent, but this one didn't warp in the slightest; its surface was already firm.

"If this is a quality exclusive to trauperle, then it's gonna be an Illgner export for sure. Let's try it out with some different types of wood tomorrow."

Lutz and I continued to carefully watch the trauperle paper transform until fifth bell, by which point it seemed completely dried out.

"Hey, Lutz. Should we try peeling it off the drying bed?"

"Just be gentle. You felt how hard the surface is; it might break apart like messed-up volrin paper. Might not be dry underneath, either."

Keeping Lutz's warnings in mind, I took the sheet made with the most trauperle and delicately peeled it away. It was hard and smooth, but it came right off without snapping.

"It's not breaking..." Lutz muttered, impressed. He attempted to bend the new type of paper, and it curved beautifully without signs of any breakage. We then tried writing on it with ink, which didn't really stay on the paper with the most trauperle in it, but came out perfectly fine on all the other prototypes. There wasn't any blotting on the sheets, either. It was paper—just paper that felt weird.

"Er, Gil... This stuff ended up pretty strange. You think it'll be any good for books?" Lutz asked, filling the air with a strange fluttering noise as he flipped through the sheets. That wasn't a question I could answer yet, so I simply shrugged.

"Who knows? Our job is just to make new paper. We can let Lady Rozemyne worry about how it's gonna be used."

"Good point," Lutz said with a chuckle, continuing to leaf through the pages. "Let's ask Giebe Illgner to get this to Lady Rozemyne as soon as possible, then. I wanna see what she ends up making with it, and I definitely want Heidi to find out what ink suits it best."

I stretched out a sheet of paper, holding it over the setting sun. In that moment, I felt as though I could already hear Lady Rozemyne say, *"Good job, Gil. You're incredible!"*

Afterword

Hello again, it’s Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 3 Volume 4*. The color art this time is predominantly focused on Brigitte’s new dress.

Damuel has fallen in love with someone of a higher status than himself. Initially, the disparity of mana between them means that Brigitte doesn’t even consider him worth thinking about romantically, but perhaps her opinion changes a little in a certain short story...?

The new printing press was also finally completed, with Rozemyne changing into her nostalgic Gilberta Company apprentice clothes for the first time in ages to sneak into the workshop and do some movable-type printing. I’ve personally gone to a printing museum and experienced using a printing press to print my name on a slip of paper. The metal letter types were very small but noticeably heavy, and lining them up on the composing stick was enormous fun. I’d recommend that anyone who’s interested go and try it out, if you can; you’ll surely feel just like a Gutenberg.

Ferdinand has finally returned to noble society, meaning Eckhart and Justus can now visit the temple as they please. As Rozemyne’s work environment gradually changes, we see the arrival of Georgine—a woman who was raised to become Ehrenfest’s aub. There are many who still worship her, and what will they do next to support her ambitions? Their sights are set on Wilfried, and who knows what fate has in store for everyone... The next volume will conclude Part 3.

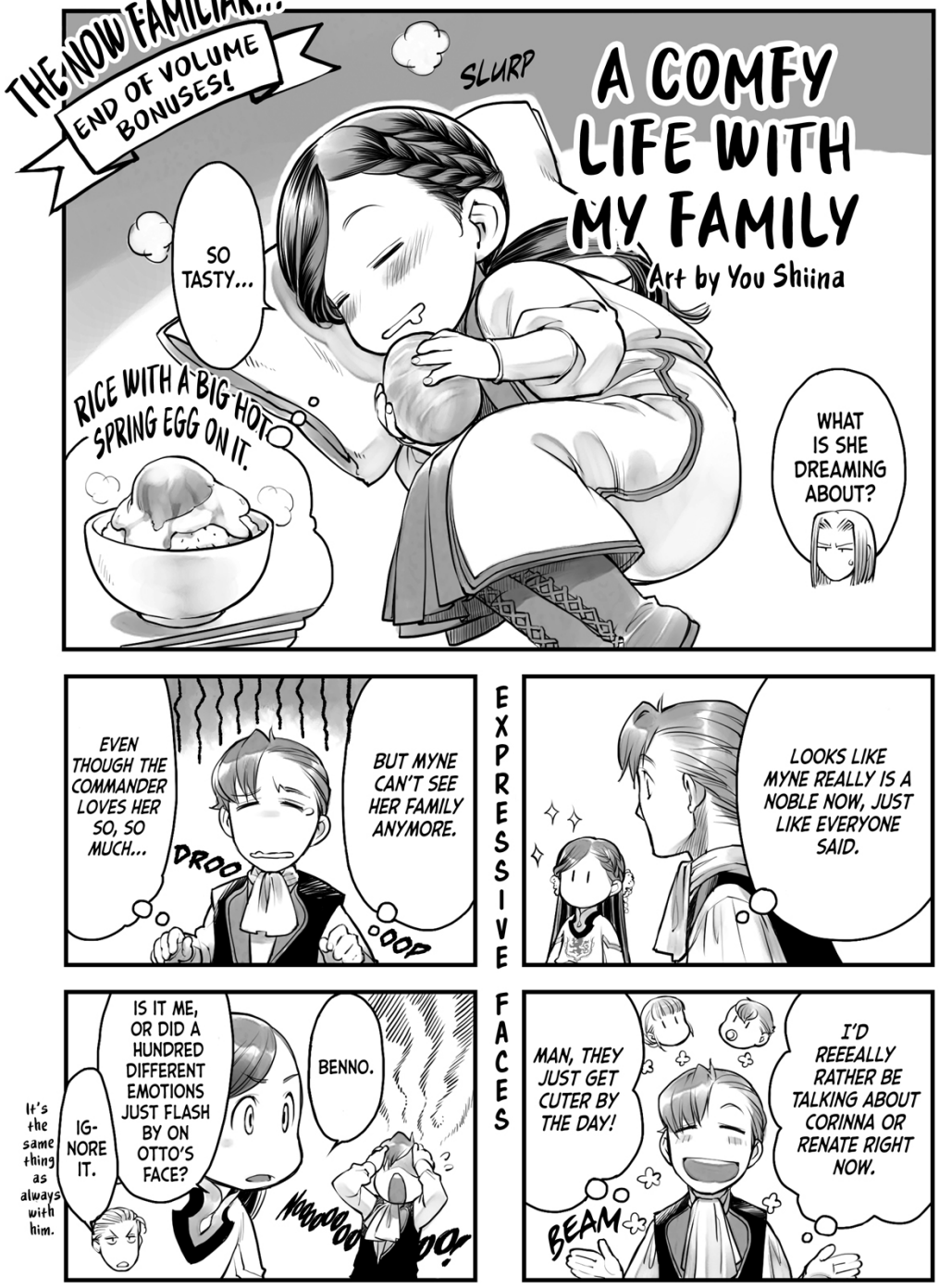
I’m also pleased to announce that the details for the *Ascendance of a Bookworm* drama CD have been ironed out. Rozemyne will be voiced by Sawashiro Miyuki-sama, while Ferdinand will be voiced by Sakurai Takahiro-sama. I requested them both, but in all honesty, I never expected that my dream would actually come true! The drama will cover an abridged version of this volume and the next, and recording should be finished by the time this volume is published.

The cover art for this volume shows Rozemyne selling her books in the

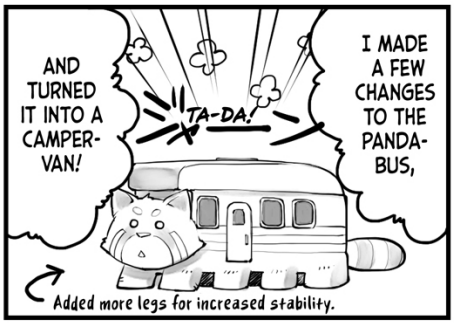
castle, with Corinna and Tuuli making Brigitte’s dress in the background. The covers sure end up all nice and flowery when there are a bunch of girls on them—am I the only one who thinks that? Shiina You-sama, thank you very much.

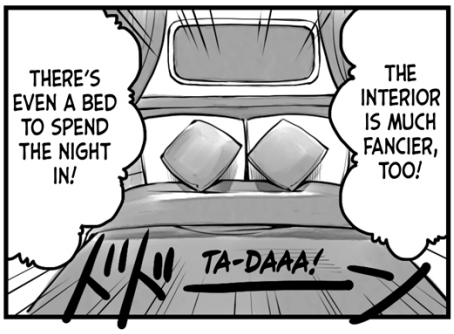
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 3 Volume 5.

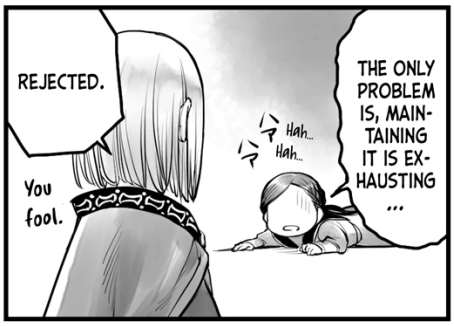
April 2017, Miya Kazuki


THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
SLURP
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
SO TASTY...
RICE WITH A BIG HOT SPRING EGG ON IT.
WHAT IS SHE DREAMING ABOUT?
EVEN THOUGH THE COMMANDER LOVES HER SO, SO MUCH...
DROO
BUT MYNE CAN'T SEE HER FAMILY ANYMORE.
OOP
EXPRESSIVE FACES
LOOKS LIKE MYNE REALLY IS A NOBLE NOW, JUST LIKE EVERYONE SAID.
IS IT ME, OR DID A HUNDRED DIFFERENT EMOTIONS JUST FLASH BY ON OTTO'S FACE?
IG-NORE IT.
It's the same thing as always with him.
BENNO.
MAN, THEY JUST GET CUTER BY THE DAY!
I'D REEEALLY RATHER BE TALKING ABOUT CORINNA OR RENATE RIGHT NOW.
BEAM

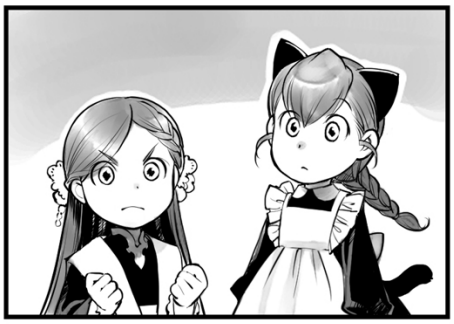
CONSERVING ENERGY

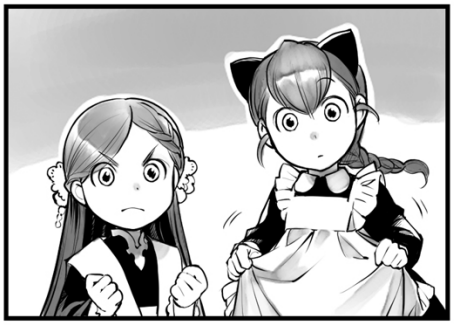






CAT-EARED MAID

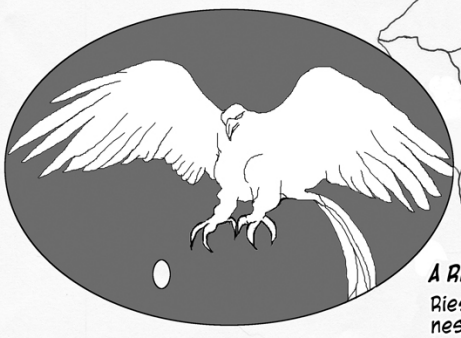




JUREVE INGREDIENTS

The Lord of Winter's Feystone (Schnesturm)

A Feybeast that appears in the north of Ehrenfest during the winter, though not always in exactly the same location. This year's Lord of Winter was a schnesturm, but its species can vary each year. It spawns subordinates, stays enveloped in a blizzard at all times, and is massive in size. For reference, those black blobs are the knights.



A Ruelle

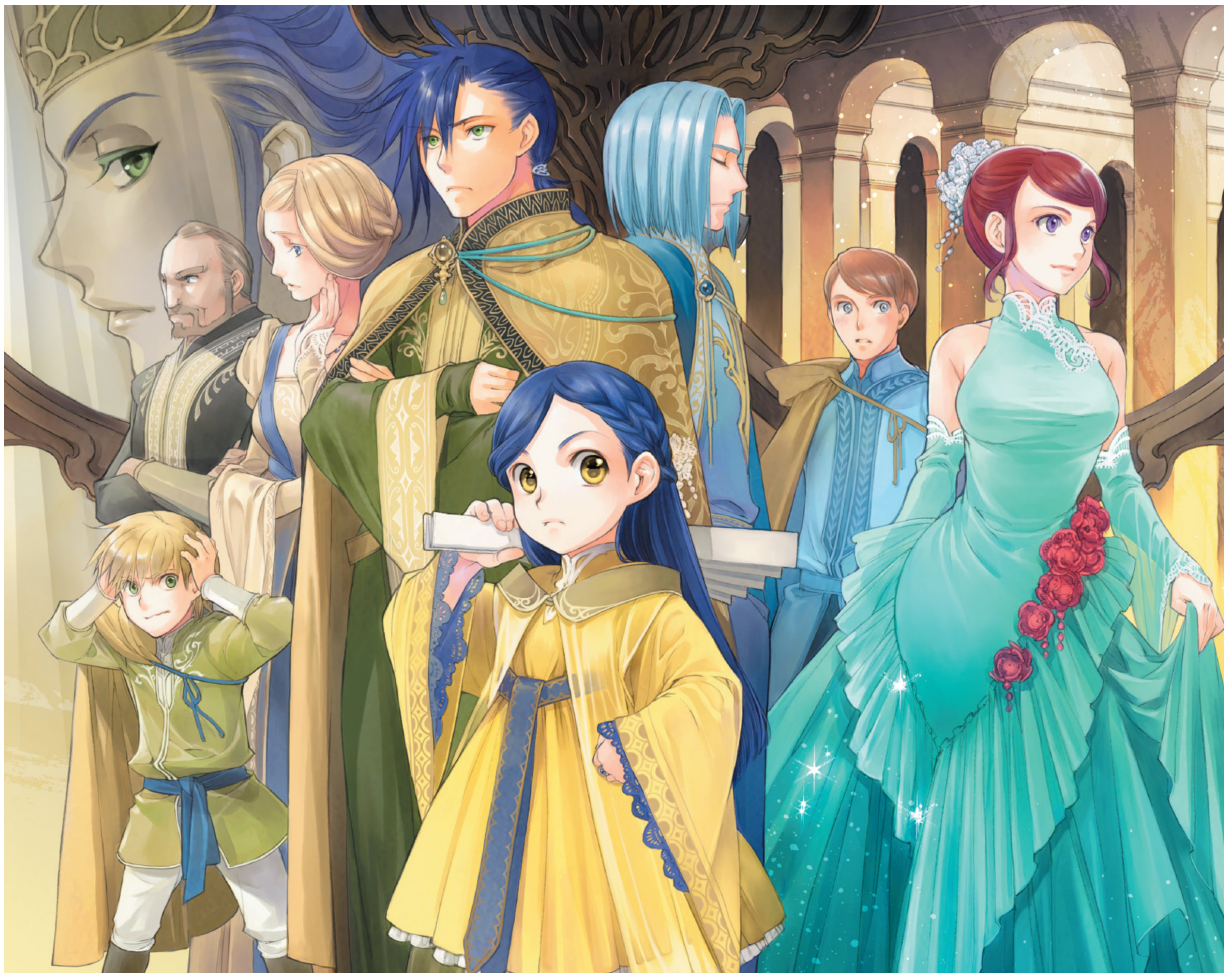
The fruit of a metallic tree located within a forest near Dorvan. Its lotus-like flowers bloom at night, revealing the purple jewel-esque fruit within. They are apparently only this color on the Night of Schutzaria, and Feybeasts swarm the tree to eat them.

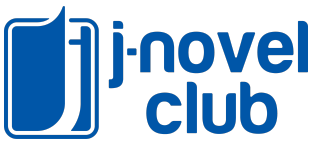
Rairein Nectar

Nectar of the flowers that bloom by the Goddesses' Bath. These flowers grow rapidly on the Night of Flutrane, then return to their normal size come morning. Talfroschs attempt to eat them. The small figure atop the leaf is Rozemyne.

A Riesefalke Egg

Riesefalke are Feybeasts that nest on Mount Lohenberg. They are large, white birds of prey, with sharp claws bent into ferocious curves. When hunting for their eggs, it is crucial to wait for when the parent birds are absent.





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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 3 Adopted Daughter of an Archduke Volume 4
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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